Virtually Visual: The Effects of Visual Technologies on Online Identification

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ABSTRACT
Identification is regarded as an important aspect of beneficial online interaction. In addition to providing the individual with potential psychological benefits, identification with an online self or avatar can also increase individual and social understanding and tolerance of difference. The ability to create a character, or avatar, that can be identified with is the initial, and arguably the most important, step in the process of identification. However, this process has changed significantly with the advent and development of visually oriented games. Through participant-observation conducted in World of Warcraft and textual analysis of online forums associated with the game, this paper investigates the ways in which visual elements of online games affect the process of identifying with an online self. Ultimately, it argues that although interacting in a virtual environment where everything is immediately visible can ease the identification process, limits on character appearance, movement, and interaction imposed by visually rendering the game could simultaneously compromise this benefit.

Keywords
identification; identity; visuality; World of Warcraft; immersion; online interaction; self.

In recent years, much has been made of the value of online immersive games in providing environments in which individuals can engage in identity exploration and play [4, 5, 6, 9, 10]. There is a general consensus among researchers that virtual worlds allow players the freedom and anonymity to create, explore, and play with multiple identities. Although this existing research reveals the potential for identity play in virtual worlds, it has focused largely on the textual aspects of online games while excluding visual elements. The goal of this study is to move beyond this focus on text and determine what kind of identity play is possible in virtual worlds given the graphical interfaces currently in use. It will be seen that while interacting in a visual virtual environment can ease identification, it remains that limits on character appearance, movement, and interaction imposed by visually rendering the game can compromise players' abilities to effectively engage in identity play.

A great deal of research has focused on the potential for identity play in visual worlds and online games. In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle examined the process of identity formation, and details how individuals are able to create, assume, and explore identities that are different from the offline self [10]. Similarly, Roseanne Stone has spoken of the "metaphysics of presence," or the ability to generate multiple online personas that deconstruct fixed notions of identity in text-based worlds [6, 7]. Both researchers suggest that the fluid and multiple nature of identity in text-based online worlds enable identity play and exploration.

Early research focuses on textual environments simply because visual games had not yet been developed. Yet much of the current work on identity play has maintained this focus, even when dealing with visual games. David Myers speaks to the "storied" and textual nature of online identity, even in virtual worlds [4]. While Constance Steinkuehler has examined the potential for learning through identity play in visual games, she has done so by focusing on in-game language use and communicative practices that largely disregard the visual elements of games (5). This continued focus on text, even within graphical games, suggests an importance that cannot be overlooked. However, as much as the importance of text to identity play cannot be denied, it is equally important to consider how visuality impacts on these explorations.

World of Warcraft (WoW), released by Blizzard Software [2] in November 2004, is one of the latest graphical online Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG). An expansion of Blizzard's earlier series of Warcraft games, WoW offers players visually rendered environments in which they can create one or many avatars, explore, complete quests, follow a storyline, and interact with other players. I have been playing WoW since the release of the live beta test in November 2004, and have done a moderate amount of offline role-playing previously. On average, I have played between 15 and 20 hours a week over the course of this research, and have created characters of all races and from both in-game factions on two different servers. Through participant observation and textual analysis of forums associated with the game I have examined the effects of visual elements of the game on player's abilities to engage in identity play.

Online gaming has grown increasingly popular in the last decade. As of March 2005, (WoW) was supporting 1.5 million active subscribers. One of the major reasons for this growth is the development of increasingly immersive and attractive games that are constructed on a visual platform. As visual technologies improve, so too does the realism of the online experience, the ease of immersion, and the ability to actively engage in an identity that feels real. Mcnaghten and Urry suggest that vision is the most powerful of the senses, and that the privilege we give to sight is greatly intertwined with how we perceive things [3]. With respect to games, T.L. Taylor makes note of the importance of the visual avatar to online identity, and notes that her research subjects feel that the avatar aids in immersion [8]. Similarly, World of Warcraft players generally agree that the sophisticated visual elements of the game increase their sense of immersion in the game and their ability to inhabit and identify with their character on a deeper level.

This is not to say that identification with the online self is by any means complete enough for players to engage in identity play in the world of WoW. A number of factors are reported which affect players' immersion in the game and identification with their character. References to offline life in in-game chat can be disruptive and serve as a reminder of the outside world. "Lag", choppy movements and screen freezes frequently created by rendering complex visual elements, can also destroy the flow of the experience and cause a break between the player and their virtual self. Despite these technical difficulties, preliminary research suggests that the main element that undermines online identification is the visual nature of avatars – the limits imposed on appearance, right from creation, and in-game movement.

Identity exploration and play can be and, in the case of WoW, are compromised by the limited nature of coding new visual technologies. The development of visually-oriented games is intrinsically limited. In contrast to text-based games, where players can describe themselves in a variety of ways and detail movements and actions, WoW players are visually limited in terms of bodies and movements, since all attributes must be pre-coded into the game. Anne Balsamo writes, "One of the most often repeated claims about virtual-reality is that it provides the technological means to construct personal realities free from the determination of body-based ('real') identities" [1]. Yet the creation of visually oriented games has reinscribed the body in online games in ways that are problematic for many players and disrupt identity play.

Between December 2004 and April 2005, over 1500 players were noted to have complained and offered suggestions about visual elements of WoW on official game forums. Some merely wrote to agree with previous comments, but it remains that thousands of players have taken the time to start or respond to messages regarding visual elements of the game. Assuming the general guideline that one customer response to an issue represents approximately 100 people with the same opinion, these numbers indicate that a huge number of WoW players are unhappy with their virtual selves. Furthermore, their in-game behaviour and out-of-game forum messages specifically suggest that they are unable to create and engage with virtual identities.

Within WoW forum discussions subscribers have made clear the value of being able to visually create and develop the character that they desire. Players feel that being able to create exactly the avatar they want greatly enhances their sense of identity, immersion, and involvement in the world, and allows them to play with an identity instead of simply having a character. They have also made clear that because of many of the visual elements of the game, they are unable to fully engage with their characters, an issue that compromises their ability to take the first step into identity play, exploration, and transgression.

There are four major ways that the visual elements of WoW have compromised players' abilities to engage in identity play. These problems, as suggested by players themselves, focus almost exclusively on their characters, both in terms of appearance and movement. Players frequently complain that they are initially unable to create a satisfactory character at all, or can only create a character that is moderately pleasing to them. Unhappy with their characters, they are then unable to engage in identity play through them. Once in-game, they also report that the fixed nature of their appearance and movements do not let them fully develop the avatar the way they desire. Some individuals have developed an online identity, yet they report that these elements of the game make it difficult to maintain identification.

The character creation interface for WoW offers a limited number of options to players. Individuals who have come to WoW from more customizable games, such as Asheron's Call and Star Wars Galaxies, write that they find the creation module especially limited. Even for those players who are not comparing between games, there are problems with the limited selection of character features. Within WoW, characters can be one of eight races – four belong to the Alliance faction and four to the Horde – and there are nine character classes, with a maximum of six of those classes available to each race. An avatar can be male or female, and has a choice, on average, of ten each of skin tones, hair colours and styles, facial feature sets, facial hair styles, and piercings. Body size and height cannot be customized, and all players of a particular class and race begin in the same clothes with the same weapon.

As a result of these limitations, even before entering into the game world some players are unwilling to create the character they initially thought they would identify with because they are unable to make them look the way they want. One player reports that, "I was originally gonna [sic] be a human mage but didn't like the idea of having the steroid injected body type," [11] while another says, "My first choice of character was a human male priest. But a priest who has the build of Conan the Barbarian was just so stupid I gave up the idea immediately" [12] statements suggest that the visual elements of character creation are not only limiting online identification but are actively discouraging some individuals from playing characters that they would enjoy exploring and using for identity play.

The main problem with limiting the visual elements of character creation is that even if individuals do successfully create a character from the options available to them, they may still have a difficult time developing a virtual identity through their avatar. There are two main identification issues that stem from the limited character creation module. While one focuses on the ability to create the desired character, the other centres on individual uniqueness and is

concerned with character similarity.

The first issue frequently discussed by players is that many people are unable to create exactly the avatar they want and, as such, have a difficult time developing an identity instead of merely playing a character. In a forum message about character creation, one player states, "This is one of those things that really helps immerse you in the game and sets each character apart. Please grant us the ability to really customize our character's appearance! If I want to play a beanpole human mage with a 6-foot beard, let it be" [13]. Similarly, another player writes that, "I feel really weird having a bulky 'wrestler' looking rogue, I can't imagine how a mage would feel…" [14], suggesting that his online sense of self is undermined by the strangeness of how his avatar looks.

Overall, there is a tendency for players to write about their online appearance in terms of limits, boundaries, strangeness, disappointment, and, in many cases, a decreased ability to experience immersion and develop and in-game identity. Every time a player looks at their online body and sees an avatar this is different from what they desire or expect, they can experience a disconnect with their online self that hinders identification. Since it can be extremely difficult to create an ideal character, given the limited choices available for character creation, players are having a difficult time developing and maintaining virtual identity, as evidenced by their own accounts of the difficulties in effectively interacting and identifying with a character that is less than they desired.

The second issue with visual appearance is that the limited nature of character creation means that most characters in a race look very similar to each other, and allow for little, if any, uniqueness between players. The lack of individuality within the game is experienced negatively by a large number of players, who feel that the similarity between avatars does not allow them to represent and assume a unique identity. In a forum thread, one player recognizes that, "A long standing critical element of [online role-playing games] is variance between player characters. If everyone looks the same, it is hard for a player to establish their own unique presence in this virtual world" [15]. Without a sense of visual uniqueness, avatar appearance undermines the individuality that is important for identity. As a result, players are finding it difficult to truly feel like an individual in-game, and are consequently not as likely to develop an identity.

One final problem with appearances that players cite is the fact that WoW avatars cannot be customized once the character has been created, except by changing external gear such as armour and weapons. These changes, which can alter avatar appearance to a degree, are also limited in terms of colour and design in and of themselves, and cannot be customized. The ability to change an avatar's appearance after the initial character creation is seen as a huge issue within WoW, and hundreds of players have offered suggestions about how changes could be made, and what kinds of changes they would like to have made possible.

A number of players have suggested that they simply want to look "older" in-game to reflect their high-level, experienced, and well-developed character. For this group, the general consensus is that being able to grey their hair and add some wrinkles would aid their identification by visually representing their perception of their online self's long in-game history and hard work. Others bemoan the fact that they cannot change any element of their avatar. For some players, the desire for change arises from boredom with a particular character and how they look. One player writes that, "We need it so when you get high level that you can pay like a gold for minor changes on character like beard, hair and that kinda stuff because some of us change our guy so many times because we are tired of what he looks like [sic]" [16]. In some cases, even boredom with an avatar's appearance has the potential to compromise identification with the online self in ways that can seriously limit long-term identity exploration.

The inability to alter appearances can be especially problematic for players who have come to

identify with and develop their character. In a number of cases, players have claimed to be unable to maintain their identification with their character because their character development and new perception of their online identity is not reflected in their appearance. Some players describe abandoning a character that they had taken the time to develop an identity with because the character's external appearance no longer matched the identity that had been developed over time in-game. Despite the time devoted to developing the character, some players feel the need to abandon a character, and the identity they have developed through it, because the avatar appearance is unchangeable and incongruous with the identity they have created.

The final threat to online identification is related to in-game character movement, which is also directly linked to the visual nature of the game. Again, creating a visual game requires that all elements of the game be pre-coded. In this way, all visual movements that can be made in-game are coded when the game is created or enhanced, and those are the only movements available to players. While avatars in WoW can do things such as walk, clap, jump, cheer, dance, and lie down, they are not able to move in any way that is not already part of the game. Furthermore, players are not only limited to the actions coded in the game, but also to how the actions are coded. The emote may be available, but it can only make the character move in a specific way that may not be what the player desires.

Given that players can generate their own "emotes" that come onscreen as descriptive text, there are relatively few complaints about emotes in general. However, players have expressed some dismay at the lack of control over emotes, and over the way emotes are presented in-game. Common complaints centre on the lack of alternatives to sexy dances, stupid jokes, and badly generated or inappropriate laughter. The alternately silly, inappropriate, and sexualized nature of some emotes strike players as unacceptable, and can affect their identification by causing the avatar to move in a way that is not customary for the player, or not in line with what they think the character would do [17].

The importance of movement to players, while explored on the game forums, can also be seen in-game. Since they are limited in their visual movements, a number of players have taken to using available movements as best they can while retreating to descriptive text emotes to fill in elements of the action that are not visually available. As innovate as this resistance to game limits is, the necessity of overcoming these limits also speaks to the importance of being able to actively control the online body in a myriad of ways in order to fully identify with the virtual self.

This preliminary research has suggested that while there may be benefits to interacting through visual online games, visual elements of WoW can also work to compromise identification and limit the possibilities for immersive identity play. Individuals may find that they are unable to create or play with an identity because of the limits on their repertoire of choice in virtual appearance and movement. There is a great deal of potential for visual games to enable identity play and exploration, but with the limits that are currently in place as a result of visual technologies the role of the visual in online identification needs to be further examined. In contrast to the apparent fluidity of identity in textual worlds, there are limits imposed on visual worlds that must be taken into account in analyses of the potential for identity play in online games. To this end, I am conducting further research in with additional analysis of the WoW forums and game environment alongside surveys and one-on-one interviews with players in order to further determine the effects of visual technologies on identification with the online self.

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