Why imaginary worlds? The role of self-exploration within online gaming worlds

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Abstract

Dubourg & Baumard posited that preferences for exploration are the key to the popularity in imaginary worlds. This commentary argues that other forms of exploration may also account for the success and appeal of specific types of imaginary worlds, namely self-exploration within interactive imaginary worlds such as videogames.

Dubourg and Baumard (2021) posited that the key reason for the popularity and enduring appeal of imaginary worlds is that they "tap into preferences for exploration" and do so primarily in terms of the spatial environments of these worlds. However, we would argue that other forms of exploration may also account for the success and appeal of specific types of imaginary worlds, namely self-exploration within interactive imaginary worlds such as videogames.

Videogames provide a unique experience in regard to exploring imaginary worlds. Whereas other forms of fictional media, such as books and films, are able to present an individual with a textual or visual window into an imaginary world, the nature of these formats inevitably means the viewer remains merely a passive observer of these worlds. However, in the case of imaginary worlds in videogames, the individual is not only an observer of the fictional world, but has a virtual presence and may actively engage and explore their gaming world environment.

Beyond exploring the spatial environments of their gaming worlds, individuals may also use videogames to explore facets of themselves that may be difficult or impossible to do in the real world. More specifically, research has demonstrated that videogame players will often design their virtual world avatar to physically resemble a 'better' version of themselves in terms of attractiveness, fitness and/or other physical characteristics (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Messinger et al., 2008). A similar process has also been found to be present in relation to the personality of the videogame player exhibited through the avatar in a game world, with users again frequently adopting a 'better' version of their personality in terms of socially desirable traits and behaviours during gameplay (Bessière et al., 2007; Sibilla & Mancini, 2018).

However, the exploration of the self does not always mean a 'better' self, but can also encompass a more negative and less socially desirable version of the self. For example, research by Sibilla and Mancini (2017) found that videogame players may use their avatar as a way to explore a 'worse' version of their offline actual self, referring to these avatar types as the 'negative hero' or 'alter-ego'. In these instances, players display more negative characteristics through their avatar compared to their offline self, and includes lower emotional stability, agreeableness, and extraversion. Nevertheless, functionally this process is the same as the 'better' version of the individual's self-avatar, and the virtual environment allows the videogame player to explore a version of themselves that is 'worse' than their offline self that would be difficult to enact in the physical world due to societal pressures to avoid exhibiting socially undesirable traits or behaviours. This demonstrates that, whether it be a 'better' or 'worse' version of the self, online videogame worlds provide environments that allow an individual to experiment with and explore different versions of their self without the constraints and restrictions placed by the physical world.

Furthermore, the role of an avatar in a videogame environment can allow for a more significant and personal exploration of the self, including compensating for self-perceived deficits or personal inadequacies by adopting the desirable personality traits of an entirely different fictional species. For instance, a recent study by Morcos et al. (2021) found that playing as the *Drenei* race (blue anthropomorphised beast creatures from the videogame *World of Warcraft*) was found to be significantly associated with compensatory behaviours. This indicates that individuals who have experienced some form of real world hardship or self-perceived deficit may identify with and play as this particular race based on the in-game lore which detail them as having both a traumatic history and resilient nature. Through personal identification with this race, videogame players may use the virtual environment of the videogame to explore a version of themselves that has the desirable personality traits of this fictional race and compensate for their self-perceived deficits present in the offline world.

Finally, this exploration of the self through an avatar can sometimes be much more pronounced and notable, with some gamers using their avatar as a means of exploring different gender identities through 'gender swapping' in-game (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). In particular, research indicates that some videogame players will use an avatar of the opposite gender in order to experiment with their gender identity in an environment that not only allows for much easier manipulation of visual characteristics than the physical world, but which is also viewed as safer and less threatening than the physical world (Arcelus et al., 2017; Griffiths et al., 2016). Consequently, individuals may use videogame environments as a precursor to coming out in the physical world, taking advantage of the freedom inherent in this virtual environment to develop and explore a part of themselves that would otherwise be difficult to do in a non-virtual setting (Morgan et al., 2020). This highlights how the virtual world environments of videogames can be utilised by individuals to not only explore a version of their self that would be physically as well as perhaps socially difficult to accomplish in a non-virtual environment, but also to build and develop this version of the self in a safe and less critical environment before embracing this identity in the real world.

According to Dubourg and Baumard, spatial exploration forms an intrinsic part of the enduring appeal of imaginary worlds. However, in the example of interactive imaginary gaming worlds, this allure may extend beyond exploring fictional environments and encompass self-exploration. While the forms of exploration discussed by Dubourg and Baumard are likely an important part of the popularity of interactive imaginary worlds such as videogames, the

authors did not consider that self-exploration can also be another key factor in the imaginary worlds of videogame playing and that many gamers create avatars to explore facets of their personality that is difficult or even impossible to do in the real world.

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