

Research-creation for identity and community creation in massively multiplayer online role-playing games

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Keywords

Methodology, identity, community, user interface, MMOs, research-creation

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) have consistently drawn attention to the interesting ways in which individuals can interact within a gamespace that is shared among disparate people, while additionally highlighting the social interactions that occur within it. This includes the various social platforms that make up the extraludic spaces that are formed and evolve around but outside of the gameworld. The experiences players have in these MMORPGs are mediated through the game's interfaces: the screens, buttons, and interactive elements that enable the various behaviours the player would enact in the gameworld. These interfaces are designed and programmed by the developers, and are created in an intentional way to allow for and elicit specific behaviours. The importance of these interfaces is clear to developers, as companies continue to invest significantly on teams of user experience (UX) designers to understand how players interact with the game.

This ongoing research project looks towards theories of game design that move beyond the typical aspects of "fun" or "playability" to focus more heavily on increasing aspects of accessibility and inclusion (Flanagan & Nissenbaum, 2014; Pearce, 2009; Bainbridge (Ed.), 2011) in online digital games. This project uses the works of critical game design scholars, as well as human-computer interaction (HCI) practitioners, that engage with ideas of accessibility, inclusion, and autonomy within their work. This opening-up of game design and games scholarship into other fields of academic research allows for a diversity of backgrounds, methodologies, and lenses for a more holistic view of identity, community, and overall user experience and how this looks like from a game design perspective.

Concisely, this research will look at the ways in which interfaces are discussed and engaged with in literature, discover overarching issues and the best practices that work towards avoiding these pitfalls, and implement those findings within typical game design platforms to prototype more inclusive and fulfilling experiences in regards to identity and community formation in online digital games. This work strives to discover how the design of an interface in online digital games can affect the ways a player can create themselves via their avatar (Pace, Houssian, & McArthur, 2009) and how players can socialize and perform within short- or long-term groups (Cărățărescu-Petrică, 2015). These specific aspects of game design have been chosen as these are very common within MMORPGs

Proceedings of DiGRA 2020

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and necessitate the usage of a game's interface in order to interact with one's avatar – through a customization and creation menu – as well as interact with others – through pick-up groups or guilds. Through the use of critical game design, user experience and user interface design, and games studies literature, I discover how these interfaces for identity and community creation can be re-designed – and *have* been re-designed over the years (Koivisto, 2003) – in a way that enables more expression, and how will these re-designed interfaces look as a result?

My research showcases the effectiveness of a research-creation methodology, an epistemology and practice that combines both academic and creative elements utilized in a scholarly, experimental, and experiential way (Chapman & Sawchuk, 2012). The methodology is not widely recognized outside of certain narrow fields of research, such as visual and performing arts and film studies, but offers a new way of combining creative expression and outputs within academic research. Research-creation highlights the necessity of the creation process being situated within the academic work, being co-constructed alongside one another to bolster the end product as something that is critically informed.

My project can thus be considered player-motivated research at the border of academia and business, as opposed to done within the private sector that tends to become stuck behind non-disclosure agreements and not shared widely. It looks to utilize research-creation as an alternative methodology for games scholars and user experience practitioners to be able to critically understand the ways in which interfaces can impact a player's experience and to use critical literature to influence the designed elements of games through the prototyping of new interfaces. The project looks to also discover and discuss ways of disseminating the academic and creative works in a way that makes them more widely available than typical academic projects, to put them in the hands of academics and practitioners alike and enable further uptake of the work.

Through the usage of research-creation in academia and to push its usage within more research projects, there is an ability to consider research not as simply a paper that gets published in a paywalled journal that is outside the reach of folks not in a post-secondary institution. Instead, thinking of research as a co-constructed research and creative endeavour, and being deliberate in the ways in can be disseminated and taken up by others, can enable projects like the current one to uncover new ways for players to interface with digital games and create themselves and form social bonds online, while also adding to the academic and creative scholarship done within and outside of the academy.

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