We also asked how important it was to customize specific parts of avatars, and how similar to their real life appearance their avatars were. In general, participants in the SL condition (M=39) created avatars more similar to their real life appearance than LotRO participants did (M=33.13) ($p<0.05$, t=1.99). We found significantly more similarity of clothing, nose, and eye color in SL participants. In terms of importance, LotRO participants found hairstyle ($p<0.001$, t=4.05), hair color ($p<0.05$, t=2.57), eye color ($p<0.05$, t=2.1) and jewelry ($p<0.05$, t=2.82) more important for their avatar customization experience than SL participants did. Across both conditions, participants felt customizing hair style (M=3.75) and hair color (M=3.48) were the most important when they were customizing their avatars, which confirms the results of a previous online survey study (Turkay, 2011).

Participants chose avatar names for different reasons in SL and LotRO. Inductive analysis of SL participants' answers produced four categories of reasoning: 1) real names or nick names, 2) celebrity names/best friend/relative names, 3) attractive names they like, 4) using a name that has a personal meaning. On the other hand, LotRO encourages players to choose names that are suitable to the theme with a help function (McCurley, 2011). Players used the help for the given prefixes or suffixes with their real life name so they made up a hybrid name. For example one player reported "It fits the Middle Earth Elven naming conventions, and it contains my wife's name." [P52] It is apparent that the theme of the game restricts or guides what names players can choose for their avatars whereas SL is a virtual world that people can choose any name that they want for their avatars.

Conclusion

We have seen several differences between participants' experiences when customizing avatars in LotRO and SL. This makes it obvious that when researchers conduct studies within virtual worlds, the theme and the affordance of the avatar customization tools may effect users' experiences with the tools and their choices of avatar appearance and names. While designing learning activities in different virtual worlds, we have to consider these differences as well. The next logical step is to investigate how these differences actually impact users' experiences within virtual worlds.

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User Experiences with Avatar Customization in Second Life and Lord of the Rings Online

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Abstract: This paper will present an exploratory study on users' experiences with avatar customization tools in two different virtual worlds: a social virtual world, Second Life and a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG), Lord of the Rings Online (LotRO). Preliminary findings highlight fundamental differences in participants' engagement in avatar creation and experience with the tools.

Introduction

The word "avatar" has become very common in daily life thanks to an increasing number of virtual worlds (Kzero, 2011), and various consumer media, including James Cameron's film *Avatar*. In virtual worlds, an avatar is the graphical representation of the user. Avatars' visual and behavioral characteristics depend on the theme and technical aspects of a virtual world. For example, Linden Lab chose "Your World. Your Imagination" motto for Second Life (SL) allowing its users to customize their avatars to a great extent. SL provides over 150 unique sliders for users to customize their avatar appearance (Linden Lab, 2008). Creating avatars can be considered a form of art in SL but it may be challenging to design a desired avatar for a novice user with these sliders. This is similar to the experience in the Metaverse, which the idea of SL is based on, as described in Snow Crash (Stephenson, 1992). Other virtual worlds provide users with different choices. For example, the Lord of the Rings Online is Tolkein's Lord of the Rings books. In this game, players can choose among four races (humans, elf, hobbit and dwarf) and nine classes. Each race and class has different characteristics both in appearance and as abilities. When users customize their avatar appearance, they scroll through preset options for head shape, eye shape, hair style, mouth, nose and so on and have a wide range of choice for colors (such as eye color, skin color and hair color). They can also adjust weight and build.

Study

Previous studies showed that customizing avatars can effect users' enjoyment, and using customized avatars may increase learning and engagement in a virtual world (Bailey, Wise & Bolls, 2009; Turkay, 2011). However, if we are to study the relation between the extent of avatar customization and user relations with their avatars, we have to take available technology and tools into consideration. For this purpose, we designed a study with two different virtual worlds: a social virtual world, SL, and a massively multiplayer online roleplaying game (MMORPG), Lord of the Rings Online (LotRO). Thirty-two participants (female=17, male=15) were asked to create a SL avatar as part of their assignment in a graduate level class. Forty participants (female=21, male=19) were asked to create an avatar by using LotRO avatar creation tools. In both conditions, participants were aware that they would be represented in the virtual world by the avatar over multiple play sessions. After avatar customization, participants were asked to fill out a 5-point Likert scale survey about their avatar customization experience (O'Brian & Toms, 2009). Open-ended questions asked why participants customized their avatars the way they did, and the reasons for their naming choice.

Results

Preliminary results show that there are significant differences between users' engagement in customizing their avatars in LotRO and SL. In general, LotRO players were engaged in their avatar customization process significantly more than SL users were ($p<0.001$; $t=6.025$). For example, LotRO players (M=4.18) had more fun customizing their avatars than those in SL (M=3.25) ($p<0.001$; t = 3.799). Interestingly, participants in the LotRO condition thought that they had significantly more choices while they were customizing their avatars than participants in the SL condition did ($p < 0.05$; t = 1.98). Although SL provides more options for avatar customization, the difficulty participants had to create a look for their avatars led to feelings of being overwhelmed and not in control.