Ideal Elves? Expressing a 3-dimensional personality in a 2-dimensional space

I. Introduction
If you were to recreate yourself as an animated character, what traits would you keep? Your appearance? Or perhaps certain personality traits? When gamers create their avatars, these are questions that play out, although they are not always consciously aware of it. We wanted to find out how the process of projecting oneself into a virtual world is navigated by gamers.

This research project was inspired by the Ideal Elf, a research manuscript by Katherine Bessière, A. Fleming Seay, and Sara Kiesler (2007). It details a study done on avatar creation in the MMORPG (Massive Multiple Online Role-Playing Game) World of Warcraft. The researchers predicted that gamers would create their main avatar more similar to an idealized version of themselves, as opposed to how they actually see themselves. It used survey data to establish this difference and compare this to their self-esteem. The gamers in the study rated their avatars as having more preferable attributes than they themselves had in real life.

Our intention with the research project was to find qualitative ways that gamers chose in their characters, to parallel the quantitative approach taken in the Ideal Elf study.

"Well in Guild Wars 2 they've got a system where, your choices are always going to be fairly white knight, like, your choices are always going to be between picking one of two good choices rather than I'm going to be a villain or I'm going to be a good guy, so, I mean, its not like they give you too much choice in that regard, it takes a little bit of imagination to put yourself in your character's shoes."
- Christopher, student, 22

II. Methods
Using a codebook that we developed through MaxQDA we analyzed about 11 hours of transcribed interviews, which were collected as part of the Virtual Worldz research project at USU and CSU.

Our sample size consisted of 11 individuals. They were chosen based on connections to the students in the class, and not from a simple random sample of gamers. They were overwhelmingly white or Caucasian and male, with 9 of the 11 interviewees identifying as male, and 8 of 11 identifying as white or Caucasian. All had at least some college education, although not all were currently students. Therefore our results are highly limited in scope, with a small and not fully representative sample size.

We compared the coded segments of interviews, and through discussion we were able to establish some trends in the way that the gamers in our sample designed their avatars with regards to their appearance, referring to cosmetic attributes; build, referring to skills and abilities; and behaviors, referring both to in-game choices and the narratives players invent about these choices.

"...I have two characters that I've created. One of them is...an action-oriented fighting Ranger... and the other one is kind of more of a social character...who's a Bard and enjoys entertaining people..."
- James, computer programmer, 25

"I guess that is similar to how I look at myself, like I like to have a peace of mind and I like to approach things with a logical not emotional type way, so I guess that kind [of] follows through."
- Eddie, student, 21

III. Data
We found that our interviewees spent half of the discussion of character design focusing on similarities to their avatar, and half focusing on differences. (Chart 1) Our interviewees showed very little previous reflection on their choice of characters, leading us to conclude that most choices in character generation are spontaneous. This can be seen by Eddie’s recognition during the interview of the behavioral similarities he shares with his character.

Additionally, as can be seen in the quote by Christopher, we found that the degree to which gamers designed characters similar to themselves was restricted by the freedom in the games. Furthermore, as suggested by James, many players relied on the multiple characters that most online games provide in order to create several characters that could each reflect different attributes of the individual gamer.

IV. Conclusions
This research raises several additional questions. Given that gamers are only capable of incompletely expressing themselves in game, what attributes are given preference? The Ideal Elf study suggests that these attributes are ones that we idealize, but this may not continue to hold true if we take into account the different attributes that are expressed in the different avatars maintained by these players. Gamers have the ability to retain multiple characters but it can be restricted by free-to-play versions of the game. (Fig. 1) Can a gamer who has access to more avatars express themselves more completely than a gamer who has fewer?

Our research suggests an additional hypothesis. If the games were complex enough, individuals may find less need to create multiple characters to reflect their own complex personalities. This hypothesis is currently untestable, but could ultimately provide greater insight as games increase in complexity.

David Tauber
Utah State University

Joshua Wanner
Utah State University

Citations:
Bessière, Katherine, A. Fleming Seay, and Sara Kiesler 2007