

Restricted affordances: Avatar models and capacities for identity

Noel Brett

McMaster University
1280 Main St W, Hamilton, ON, Canada
brettn@mcmaster.ca

Christopher Hugelmann

Ryerson University
250 Victoria St., Toronto, ON, Canada
chugelmann@ryerson.ca

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INTRODUCTION

For many digital games, a player is able to construct their digital identity with an *avatar*. Digital games often prescribe character customization interfaces (CCIs) which allow the player to create or customize their avatar. Yet, the range of possibilities given to a player is restricted by the design choices placed by the game's interface, ultimately limiting the "possibilities a certain [avatar] has to interact with the game mechanics" (Tronstad 2008, 253). This means that while avatars can aesthetically represent the player and offer them a virtual existence, mechanics can hinder the ways in which the player plays and performs in the virtual space. In these cases, there is very little negotiation accessible to the player, as the restrictions are unidirectional with no reciprocity between user and the hard-coded user interface affordances.

Within the restrictions imposed by the game's CCIs in games such as *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) (Blizzard 2004), for example, avatars consequently showcase limitations to embodiment that enforce certain normative ways of being online. The idea of "making up people" (Hacking 1986, 233) can be used in this analysis, as digital games (and their technological affordances) tend to create categories for types of people in highly regimented and limiting ways. Thus, players attempt to represent themselves in these digital games, yet only so much is afforded to them in terms of avatar creation, where the game instead creates types of avatars *for* the player (typically Caucasian males). As such, this paper aims to demonstrate the ways in which designed interfaces for avatar creation

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actively restrict identity, play, and performance. Thus, even avatar creation interfaces can act to establish more normalized ways of being within these gameworlds.

This considered, Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) offer a useful reuptake of Goffman's (1959) work on identity performance and social interaction by applying performance as an analogy in the world of digital games. In "The presentation of self in the online world: Goffman and the study of online identities", Bullingham and Vasconcelos express that specific design choices are available to the online self, and that these choices inevitably emphasize or minimize certain aspects of the player, such as aesthetic and gendered facets. In other words, the ways in which individuals can perform their online self are mediated by deliberate design choices made by programmers, placing a specification of expression within these games. However, players have increasingly become "editors and creators – designing and creating self-representations" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos 2013, 103), bringing to the foreground certain characteristics of the self while allowing others to fall to the background. This directly evokes Goffman's (1959) notions of frontstage and backstage in a new digital game context that further involves the complications of technological or normative restrictions to expression.

"Individuals, therefore, [...] are encouraged to adopt a different online persona, but the effect is finite in that there is the need to observe rules and conventions local to the online community or environment." Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013, 104

This process is reflected in the longitudinal behavioural data analysis done by Yee et al. (2011). Their study examines the behavioural outcome of conflicting gender cues between player and avatar from the digital online game *World of Warcraft (WoW)* (Blizzard 2004). The results showcased that the gender of an avatar does influence certain performative characteristics of the player as they interact with other avatars. Social functions, such as player vs player (PvP) fights and teammate healing, were influenced by changes to avatar gender (not player gender), proving statistically significant – PvP favouring male avatars and healing for female avatars. In customizing one's avatar in *WoW*, players are presented with a gender binary, which renders normative expectations of gender as a restriction of performative play for their avatars. Contentiously, the study also expresses that "avatar gender is entirely cosmetic and does not lead to any functional difference in terms of game-play" (Yee et al. 2011, 2). However, the division of identity and functionality is arguable – primarily given that "[players] will perform to those watching by observing certain rules [enforced by affordances] and social conventions [gender expectations, in this case]" (Bullingham & Vasconcelos 2013, 1) and thus will attempt to "keep face", to use Goffman's (1959) parlance.

Furthermore, when there is a limitation in the "range of sign-equipment" (Goffman 1959, 29) that the individual can access – such as how they are able to display their avatar in a digital game – the player is not be able to interact with or partake in certain aspects of the game. Hence, the player in control of the avatar can only perform and represent themselves in technologically limited and exceedingly stratified ways. Arguably, this would mean that a perfect representation of oneself is not entirely possible given the limiting affordances granted to the player. McArthur et al. (2015) discuss the idea of *default configurations*, i.e., a pre-set identity reflected on the avatar when first navigating

character creation interfaces. Since the default configuration generally manifests as a Caucasian male, players must actively make choices to identify as an “Other”. Deviating from the standard avatar proved to be difficult in some cases, since “Players of *Jam City Rollergirls* choose components of ethnicity as though they are selecting pieces of an outfit” (McArthur 2015, 8). Thereby, in order to play as a Person of Colour in *Jam City Rollergirls* (Frozen Codebase 2011), a player – deviating from this game's default configuration – is forced to match clothing components (which are minimal in this case) with the ethnicity of their avatar, rendering limitations of how they choose to identify with their avatar. More specifically, one can see how interface design restrictions make choices *for* the player and make up a certain type of person (Hacking, 1986) through their implementation.

These explorations point towards a certain type of stratification of individuals within digital spaces based upon certain digital affordances and subsequent ways of being presented in online avatars. Through this, players, as social actors, are placed in already established roles (Goffman 1959) through specific affordances granted via their avatar by the game’s design. This becomes a troubling circumstance and an important avenue for further research as digital games become an increasingly substantial place to play with representation, identity, and performance in the online sphere.

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