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The Recursive Relationship between Virtual and Real in Relationships

Editorial

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Introduction

We live in an era of digitally-mediated relationships. From finding a spouse online to daily interactions facilitated through social media, many people build and sustain both platonic and romantic relationships with technology. Virtual worlds are also spaces for these interactions. Virtual world inhabitants will often initially use the space to develop alternative self-portraits (e.g. Black, Ferdig, DiPietro, Liu, & Whalen, 2009) and then create and maintain relationships with those avatars and other human players out-of-world, with other human players in-world, and with non-player-characters in-world (Ferdig & Pytash, 2012). This can lead to even more complex relationships as they balance their lives and relationships in-world and out-of-world.

This special issue of the Journal of Virtual Worlds Research is dedicated to an exploration of such topics in a collection of articles exploring “real virtual relationships.” This is an area of study that continues to emerge across multiple disciplines such as education, psychology, sociology, digital media studies, computer science, public health, game studies, literature, counseling, religion, family studies, and business.

Article Discussion

There are a number of lessons that can be learned through the articles in this issue, focusing specifically on the literature reviews, findings, and implications sections. There is a danger in providing a cursory overview in that our bird's eye perspective might hide many of the interesting nuances the authors proposed. However, we felt inclined to use this special issue to highlight at least six key lessons learned in our attempt to further understand the relationship between virtual and real.

1. **New methodological processes are required to address the complexity of study in real and virtual lives.** A person with an avatar in a virtual world or game has at least three different units of analysis: a) the in-life person; b) the in-world person; and c) the navigation a person makes between the in-life and in-world actions, beliefs, and behaviors. Add a second person and navigating these units of analysis becomes even more complex. Studying behavior using traditional methods may not accurately describe or address the context and nuances of such relationships.

Bergstrom, Jenson, de Castell, & Taylor, in their paper "Virtually Together: Examining Pre-Existing Relationships in MMOG Play," make this point clear in their examining of existing relationships in massive, multiplayer online games. Their work provides evidence that people who have an existing relationship play in similar ways. They could further distinguish these relationships by addressing avatar proximity. Such findings are interestingly methodologically because they present new ways to learn about players and new ways to learn how players interact in-world given in-life relationships.

2. **An increase in virtual experiences requires new terminology to define pretexts, contexts, and outcomes of engagement.** We have previously made such an argument, noting that a deeper psychology of technology would help researchers, educators, and practitioners identify patterns of practice (Ferdig & Weiland, 2002). However, the argument needs refreshing as there is evidence of psychological processes occurring in the gray space between real and virtual.

Gualeni, Vella, & Harrington in their paper "De-Roling from Experiences and Identities in Virtual Worlds" suggest a term that could be useful in understanding real virtual relationships is 'deroling.' They describe the term as the ability of a person to separate from their character. They argue that virtual reality enthusiasts would benefit from an understanding of deroling in VR as it relates to therapeutic uses, experience design, dramatherapy, and personal investment.

3. **Innovative virtual experiences introduce new opportunities to study interactions with non-human players.** Early researchers provided evidence that the more knowledgeable other in a learning relationship could be the computer (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1996). More recent research replicated that work and demonstrated that humans display similar types of emotions towards non-human counterparts, even to the point of wanting to betray and punish them (Ferdig & Mishra, 2004). New virtual experiences introduce non-human elements that are worthy of psychological exploration.

Harth in his paper "Empathy with Non-Player Characters? An Empirical approach to the Foundations of Human/Non-Human Relationships" completed such an exploration. His work on empathy with non-player characters supports the importance of studying and capitalizing on virtual empathy. Harth pushes the issue to even suggest that video games successfully invite players to view these objects/subjects as symmetrical. The work results in a renewed desire for

the field to examine and engage real relationships with virtual beings.

4. **Not all online interactions are positive, but that doesn't mean they're all negative.** Internet memes frequently stereotype video game players who make a living interacting in virtual spaces by insulting family members. There is some level of truth to the possible 'R' ratings that can occur in online relationships, particularly in games. However, that does not mean that all interactions are negative.

Ivory, Ivory, Wu, Limperos, Andrew, & Sesler in their paper "Harsh Words and Deeds: Systematic Content Analyses of Offensive User Behavior in the Virtual Environments of Online First-Person Shooter Games" coded interactions during gameplay of both *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, and *Halo: Reach*. Their results suggested that utterances by players were often minimal. Second, and perhaps more important, evidence of insults, threats and slurs were also rare. The fact that it still exists requires continued training and vigilance, particularly for parents. However, this does not mean that the baby should be thrown out with the bathwater. Further exploration into these occurrences, making these outcomes positive, and establishing an understanding of the impact of these utterances on in-life outcomes is necessary.

5. **Non-participants in virtual world activities could tell us just as much about relationships as consistent players.** When completing a study, it makes sense to evaluate the actual users of that intervention. If researchers want to study the impact of video games, they study people who play video games.

Marc in his paper "Not Playing the Game: Negative Opinions about Online Dating and Video Gaming among Non-Participants" makes an argument, however, that a lot can also be learned by studying the non-participants. By not choosing to participate in certain activities, people potentially provide insight—or at least a counter story—to the frequent participants.

Conclusion

In addressing the topic of 'real virtual relationships', we suggested there were six lessons learned. The final lesson, used here as a conclusion, has to do with the confluence of real virtual relationships. Researchers—and media conglomerates—often highlight the impact of in-world on in-life practices. Headlines address kids of parents who spend too much time on social media; researchers study the impact of learning violence in video games.

The truth, to quote the famous lyricist Jimmy Buffet, is that it's not that simple. We have enough evidence that our online interactions can shape our in-life actions, beliefs, and behaviors. But, those same actions, beliefs, and behaviors shape our actions online. This is common sense but we seem to forget the confluence nature. Today's real virtual relationships are complex dynamics between human and non-human characters where outcomes in both in-world and in-life contexts consistently impact future actions. We need more research that represents this continuity of thought and study.

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