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Case studies of actors playing the game of EverQuest and inhabiting the social world of Second Life
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Abstract

With a background in avatar studies since 2002, the author of this paper will briefly introduce some of the analytical optics that have been applied to the avatar studies as influenced by social psychology, sociological and behavioural studies (Schroeder, 2002; Schroeder & Axelsson, 2006; Turkle, 1995; Williams et al. 2008, Yee, 2006). The analytical aim of this is to analyse the interrelations of actor and avatar as seen from a sense-making optic and, thus, to question the understanding of avatars according to which they are seen as a representation of the actor "behind" and as the object of projection and of playing with identities.

The main argument is meant to encourage us to focus our attention on the *triadic transformative processes* of relatings between actors and their avatar(s) and the sense-making interpretations hereof, because these relations may hold potential for social innovation and reflection. In all of the *EverQuest* and *Second Life* cases studied by the author (see below), the triadic transformative processes seem to significantly inspire and influence the actors and the way in which their avatars and in-world being make sense. When we seek to empirically answer the questions about what make the actors choose and develop their avatar(s) the way they do, and how come that it makes sense to do so, then it appears that 1) the avatar is not just an intermediary that transports the

meaning-makings as generated by their actors in a kind of projection; rather, 2) the avatars are seen as personal *mediators*. With the analytic optic of actor-network theory, they are mediators which transform the meaning that they carry. Thus, the interrelations of the actors with their avatars and their mediating interpretations are seen as triadic processes in the sense that the actors' sense-makings influence their avatars but *the avatar also actively influences the actor*. To analyse these transformations, the author suggests that we focus our analyses on sense-making studies and on the transformative processes of mediators. When seen through the lenses of the latter, the avatar(s) are conceived of as *nonhuman companions* rather than representations or objects of identification and projection, that is, as mediators that afford transformative processes of sense-makings.

To empirically ground the main argument, the paper will draw on findings from avatar studies since 2002 and, in particular, eight case studies that have been followed within the time span 2006-2009 (Jensen 2008, 2010). The case studies are analysed with reference to Sense-Making Methodology as developed by communication researcher Brenda Dervin (2003) and actor-network theory as developed by Bruno Latour (2005). Moreover, in order to methodologically ground the discussion of the empirical findings, the paper will address the applied method of studying actors while they are acting with their avatar(s) *in situ* and by *in-depth video interviews*. In this way, the paper will also contribute to the ongoing discussion of whether to study net-based communication and relationships mainly on the basis of online agencies, or, if and how, it makes sense to include off-line studies as well (Boelstorff, 2008; Hine 2005).

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