Free to Be Me: A Survey Study on Customization with World of Warcraft and City of Heroes/Villains Players

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Abstract

While large amounts of resources are put into making games engaging, little is known about the effect of specific game features such as customization. This study is part of a larger research which focuses on the effect of customization on user motivation, enjoyment and engagement. The goals of this exploratory survey study were to investigate the importance of customization on players’ enjoyment and motivation to play, and the effectiveness of different forms of customizations on enjoyment and motivation. We also aimed to capture players’ reasons for specific game customizations, and investigate differences in gender, player experience in these areas.

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1. Introduction

Many academic institutions and corporations are interested in designing multiplayer games to attract larger audiences. However, the research on specific design features of multiplayer games is lacking. The need for targeted design priorities is crucial if an audience is to be attracted and retained. This is especially true for lesser funded projects. Previous research has indicated user control to be a motivating factor for continued engagement (Wise & Reeves, 2009). One common form of user control found in games today is the ability to customize. There is no published research on the effect of the ability to customize on player engagement, enjoyment, and motivation. Many games, especially massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs), offer players ways to customize players’ experience, either through built-in options or the ability to create or obtain add-on software modules. This ability to customize allows players to personalize their avatars/characters and control aspects of their play experience, possibly identifying more closely with the game and “taking ownership” of it.

Massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) are persistent, networked, interactive, narrative environments, that support large numbers of people, either synchronously or asynchronously. MMORPGs allow players to move and interact in simulated realistic or fantasy environments through their game characters (or avatars). These features enable players to experiment in these simulated worlds. It is important for learners to have

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opportunities to explore and manipulate inside a learning environment, in order to encourage the construction of knowledge (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1990; Jonassen, 1999).

The two games currently used in this study, World of Warcraft (WoW) and City of Heroes/Villains (CoX) both belong to the same genre of digital games, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), but they belong to different sub-genres, with WoW having a fantasy setting, and CoX having a superhero theme. They have similar mechanics, allowing players to create and evolve characters. However, the degree of user control in various areas differs greatly. For example, the degree of user control during character creation in CoX is widely acknowledged as among the most flexible in the field of gaming. Every body part can be colored to the users preference, and many can have a variety of textures applied to them (i.e. scales, metallic shine, etc). After the initial steps, WoW has far greater options. It allows for massive customization of the interface. It supports user created addons (or mods) and macros. There is a wide variety of gear to choose from for your character to wear, though the appearance of that gear is not customizable as it is in some games. Finally, "re-speccing", the act of resetting the talents (or in the case of CoX power sets) of your character is much more easily accomplished in WoW.

While investigating the effects of customization in games in this paper, we group customization into 3 categories: Type I: Customization that affects players’ game play directly, such as customizing talent trees in WoW. Type II: Customization that do not affect players’ game play directly, such as customizing character appearance. Type III: Customization that does not affect game-play directly but may affect player performance. Interface customization falls in this third category. We will talk about examples in these categories in the findings section.

2. Background

Innovations in new technologies enable users to do several things that they were not able to do a decade ago. Networking, sophisticated graphical representations, and being connected through mobile devices are all part of these new innovations. Many people can and do use these technologies, but the question remains of how important they are to our lives and what their strengths are.

Customizability is a principle of flexible design, defined as “modifiability of the user interface by the user of the system” (Dix et al., 1998, p. 168). Based on these definitions, most research on customization has focused on user interfaces, not on features such as customizing game characters, audio, terrain, etc. Similarly, Dyck et al. (2003), reviewed fourteen PC games and identified deep customizability as one of four novel contributions that provide clear benefits to players. However, they did not relate player demographics to types of customizability. Developers need to understand which types of customization are important, related to users and the software/game being developed.

This study builds on the research done on user control in the area of Computer Based Instruction (CBI). The results of several studies on student control in CBI indicate the positive effects of this control over elements of instruction (Corbalan et al., 2006; Kinzie et al., 1988; Shyu and Brown, 1992; van Merriënboer et al., 2002). Learner control allows users to determine their progress through a lesson, and to choose learning activities that suit their personal preferences and needs (Carrier, 1984). Yet, while CBI research exists implying that personalization leads to identification and ownership, and is related to motivation and achievement, research examining specific uses and effects of customization in games is lacking.

Vogel et al. (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of computer games and interactive simulations for learning. They found studies that used programs where the learner controlled their navigation through the system more effective than traditional teaching methods in creating cognitive gains. This suggests more effective learning when learners can control their navigation in a computer game or interactive simulation.

Another guiding foundation of this research is Dickey’s research (Dickey, 2007) on understanding and re-using design principles from MMORPGs for educational applications. Game developers need to understand which types of customization are important, related to users, and the software/game being developed. Petty et al.’s study showed that individuals prefer objects or experiences that are closely tied to their self (Petty et al., 2002). In the last year, Ducheneaut et al. (2008), at PARC (Palo Alto Research Center) have examined the most important avatar customization features, and found that the hair was the most important feature across three virtual worlds, possibly because users help define their personality through changing their avatar’s hair. This current research aims to shed more light on how and why uses chose to customize certain features and how designers and educators can use this information for better instructional design.
3. Methodology, Participants and Data Analysis

We used survey method to collect data from online forums through snowball sampling. These forums were public and private WoW guild forums and the official CoX forum. The surveys asked questions about participants’ demographic information, their game characters, play styles, their enjoyment of game play based on different game features, their motivations to play, and the game features that they would like to customize. The survey had 26 five-point Likert scale and 18 open-ended questions. Data was analyzed by using the quantitative data analysis software SPSS 17.0, and qualitative data analysis software Nvivo 8.0. Open ended questions were analyzed with Nvivo 8, using inductive codes.

Participants were 354 WoW players (65 female, 289 male) and 102 CoX players (17 female, 85 male). The data was collected from participants over the course of a year and a half.

4. Findings

In general, out of the total population, 65.94% +/- 6.14 (p<0.05) said that customization affected their enjoyment to a moderate or large degree. When we compared ability to customize with other game features such as sound and graphics, participants chose customization significantly more than other choices as an important feature for their enjoyment of the game (p < 0.05). Between the two games, CoX players value customization higher than WoW players. (58% of WoW and 85% of CoX players said being able to customize affect their interest in the game).

In order to better understand players’ reasoning in different types of customizations, we asked specific questions. We found significant differences in how people weight various game features’ importance and in how much they enjoy different customizations. Below are some of these findings.

4.1. Game Interface (Type III)

A game’s interface is where players communicate with the game, so it has intrinsic importance to players. The quality of game interface affects players’ gaming experience. As a male WoW player puts it “Interface affects the core mechanics of the game, so flexibility here is desirable to allow for a player to process game information and interact.” Many games offer limited interface customization to players. Among all the participants, 66% said interface is important for their interest in the game. Although male players rated the importance of interface higher than female players did, the difference was not significant. We found that if players find interface an important feature of the game, they want to be able to customize it (p<0.01). We wanted to know how important it is to WoW and CoX players to be able to customize their game interface.

Mods give WoW players an enormous amount of latitude when it comes to interface control. This was reflected in our results. Significantly more WoW players favored interface customization as an important feature than CoX players (p<0.05). There was no significant gender difference either in how much interface affected interest or how much they are interested in customizing the interface.

4.2. Character Appearance (Type II)

Game characters are virtual representations of players in the game world. What allows each character to differ from others are the various attributes, skills, decorations/physical appearance, and traits (Dickey, 2007). Character appearance is one of the favorite customizations for both WoW and CoX players. As we mentioned previously, character creation in CoX is more flexible than WoW. It is possible that this flexibility is one of the features of the game which attracts gamers. Supporting this idea, we found that CoX players are more motivated to play the game when there are character customization options than WoW players do (p<0.01).

Customizing characters’ physical appearance affected female participants’ interest in game significantly more than male participants (p<0.05). Women also enjoy customizing their character appearance significantly more than men do (64.87% of men and 85.29% of women; p<0.01). Moreover, character appearance is the most favorite customization for female players. Analysis of open-ended question revealed that being unique in the gaming community is one of the driving reasons to desire to customize character appearance. A female player complains about character customization in WoW: “Character appearance is the most important. ...though you can make your
avatar pretty there are a million players that have the exact same avatar... I want to be the one to decide how big my bust and hips are not have it automatically chosen for me.” The most common features the participants talked about in the open ended responses were changing their body and build, and generally making changes that would be noticeable from a reasonable distance.

Several players said that their character is a persona they choose to be in a virtual environment, so they desire to have a control over how they want to be represented (More specifically, 25% of participants said so). They see the time spent on their character creation a personal and emotional investment, so they do want to have more control over it. A CoX player states how he sees his character: “The character name and physical appearance tie in together, and are best explained in my last answer. I'm not creating a "toon" like others do, I'm crafting a persona, a role and vehicle for my escapism.”

4.3. Sound (Type II)

Sound in games can be categorized as background/ambient sounds and sound effects. Sound effects are used to provide support for the game play and immersion in many games. In 3D games, sounds often convey a lot of information to the player, allowing them (as in real life), to know generally where something is, without having to look at it. Since sound is so useful, it is a little surprising that most users across the board showed little to no interest in it. They not only didn’t want to customize it, they generally thought it was significantly less important than any other game feature. This was true across games and gender. On the other hand some players who value sound in game think that it would be motivating to have customization options for sound: “…game experience could be dramatically changed if we were allowed to choose different voices or foot-step sounds. That'd be fun.” – A CoX player

4.4. Talents/Power Sets (Type I)

Talent trees are one of the most interesting and therefore unique aspects of customization in WoW. Once players’ characters reach level 10, they are be able to spend their first talent point, then characters get 1 point for every level they gain. Talents are special abilities that enhance game characters in many different ways, for example by giving them an edge in melee combat, or by increasing the power of their spells, or by unlocking completely new and unique skills. By spending talent points, players can customize their character to fit their own personal style of play, so that the same character class can be adapted to several different ways of playing this class (www.worldofwarcraft.com). The corresponding game element of CoX is called power sets. They not only define how well a character does things, they also determine what the character can do at all. Without any powers, a superhero would quite literally be powerless.

CoX and WoW players agree on the desire of custom build talent trees/power sets for ultimate flexibility in the game. Among all participants, 71% rated talents/power sets an important or very important factor affecting their interest in their game. Although CoX players rated power set customization more desired than WoW players did, it was not a significant difference.

Players think that customizing talents/power sets are important as they allow them to choose what their characters do in the game. Especially in WoW, where character appearance does not make a big difference, talent customization can make a character very different from others.

5. Discussion

One of the core principles of design is: “Know your audience.” In the case of user control options, this can’t be stressed enough. People feel so strongly about various types of customization that failing to provide support for them can greatly decrease their enjoyment of your product. If players’ enjoyment drops enough, they’ll stop playing. Of course, since providing extra features takes resources, knowing their audience can save developers from spending time and money on things their player base may not care about. When considering demographic differences, there are not only gender differences but also cultural differences in wanting to customize. Yee noted that many Asian MMORPGs have pre-defined character appearances while Western MMORPGs give the user the ability to customize many physical features because while using complex character creation tools, Asian gamers get
frustrated when more skilled gamers create more attractive characters than theirs (Yee, Deadulus project). Yee further acknowledges that “While this at first appears as if Western gamers care more about their appearances and individualism compared with Asian gamers, the underlying issue is two very different views of egalitarianism”

Female MMORPG players tend to play female characters more (Yee, 2006). While female players rated customizing their character appearance as the most enjoyable form of customization, female characters have fewer options than male characters in WoW. This kind of results can inform game designers when creating engaging games for a target audience.

6. Conclusion

Games are considered to be motivating and engaging in general. Empirical research in the area of understanding the design features which make games motivating and engaging is lacking. This study is taking an important variable, customization, and trying to capture importance of it compared to other game features across game genres and player demographics. The first stage of this study we briefly talked about in this paper demonstrated that players’ engagement with two very popular MMORPGs depends on players’ control over their character development, as well as the overall game play, and how players value different customization options over others in different types of games. We believe that this line of research is important to pursue as there are dozens of virtual worlds and games are being created every year. While educational applications of these environments are still being explored, it is important to exploit engaging features of these environments. Therefore, along with survey studies, we are preparing to further broaden our game sampling by including more games in the study and work with players in face-to-face environment for a deeper understanding of their internal processes. We believe that these steps will bring researcher closer to truly understanding the complete structure of player’s interaction with customization and its relationship to engagement, enjoyment and motivation in game.

References