WHY PEOPLE JOIN VIRTUAL WORLDS OF COMPUTER GAMES? QUALITATIVE RESEARCH AMONGST POLISH USERS.

Magdalena Hofman-Kohlmeyer[1]

Abstract: Growing ranks of companies saw new opportunities for marketing activities inside virtual worlds of computer games. Success of any project depends on a sufficient number of users. The purpose of this paper is to identify the players' motives for participation in virtual worlds of computer games. The author carried out 22 in-depth interviews amongst polish players. The results show that people join virtual worlds not only for obvious reasons like exploring the virtual world or meeting new people but they also make money inside the game by selling virtual products, developing new virtual places or participating in lectures and conferences.

Introduction: When virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life or World of Warcraft) became immensely popular, with millions of active users around the world, real life companies started to utilize them for business purposes, such as testing new products or organizing various events. However, the activities of companies can only be successful if a sufficient number of players are engaged in virtual worlds.

Objectives: The present paper is aimed to investigate individual players' motives for joining virtual worlds of computer games.

Methods: The author carried out 22 in-depth interviews amongst polish players (20 were finally accepted) of three virtual worlds: The Sims, Second Life and Euro Track Simulator 2. Interviews were carried out from August 21, 2018 to December 5, 2018.

Results: Respondents most frequently mentioned consecutively: curiosity (caused by TV series, TV programme, newspaper or advertisement), interact with others, interest in the topic of a game, enjoyment from playing, opportunity to see or do things unattainable in real life, exploring the virtual world, spending free time. With reference to the gratification paradigm, individual motivations were divided into: experiential (16 motives), functional (6 motives), social (3 motives). From the perspective of marketing managers, understanding the motivations of players allows them to describe the target market of their promotional activities inside the game environment. For game developers, it can help attract new and maintain current users.

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Introduction

The rapid growth of the Internet has caused ~~some~~ changes for the way in which contemporary enterprises are conducted in comparison to twenty years ago. Recently, when social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube attracted large number of Internet users, business activities in these platforms also gained popularity. In Parallel, the emergence of online virtual worlds like Second Life or World of Warcraft occurred (MacKenzie et al., 2013).

A virtual world is a computer-based simulated environment where users become its residents and can communicate via avatars representations (Peng and Ke, 2015). Many virtual worlds were created, which were repeatedly divided into categories according to different criteria (Fetscherin, Lattemann & Lang, 2008). Virtual worlds can be divided into those oriented onto the goal of the game, where players strive to achieve specific results or eliminate opponents (e.g. World of Warcraft and Everquest) and virtual worlds oriented onto social aspects (e.g. Second Life, The Sims). Game-oriented virtual worlds show the player primarily the rules of the game while the second group gives them more freedom (Koles & Nagy, 2012). Games based on virtual worlds provide entertainment for a global audience of multi-generational participants (MacKenzie et al., 2013). Virtual worlds have become immensely popular, with millions of active users around the world (Kumar et al., 2008). Real life companies have started to utilize virtual worlds for business purposes (Scarle et al., 2012). Companies have started conducting marketing research, testing new products, organizing various events and conferences, recruiting new employees and selling real life products in virtual worlds (Mitręga and Hofman-Kohlmeyer, 2017). Retailing in the game environment is considered an evolution of the traditional web store, with deeper shopping experiences for customers (Hassouneh and Brengman, 2015).

However, the activities of companies can only be successful if a sufficient number of players are engaged in virtual worlds. In order to attract users to the game it is important to gather knowledge about users' motivations for using virtual worlds (Zhou et al., 2011). The purpose of this paper is to identify some individual motives for the participation in virtual worlds of computer games. The article is organized as follows. The first part represents a review of previous research based upon the available

[1] University of Economics in Katowice, Faculty of Informatics and Communication, magda-hofman@o2.pl

literature. The second part contains the research method and characterization of the sample. The third part constitutes the results of the study. The paper is ended with final conclusions.

Previous research

From the beginning of the commercial use of virtual worlds, little research was conducted which considered the individual motives of joining virtual worlds. For example, the study by Zhou et al. (2011), investigated individual motivations and differences based on the literature and gratification paradigm. The gratification paradigm was previously developed in mass communication research and related to explore user motivations for new media uses. These motivations can be classified into three general types according to the values: functional, experiential and social. Functional values can be increased by the achievement of pre-determined tasks such as buying a product or obtaining information using the Internet. In terms of the virtual world, functional values can be related to running a virtual business or buying in virtual shops. Experiential values are derived from the experience of Internet usage, e. g. from the enjoyment and relaxation brought about by browsing websites. In virtual worlds users can enjoy themselves by exploring the game environment with for example various tropical islands, gardens and tourist attractions. A growing amount of people use the Internet for social values. They establish and maintain interaction with others. This virtual worlds occurs through players meeting and chatting with other residents, establishing social relationship and joining some communities.

The authors conducted an online survey in Second Life through in-world messages, e-mail and discussion forums. The questionnaire contained questions about demographic and situational factors like age, gender, or experience in Second Life and open-ended questions related to reasons for using Second Life. During the 6-week period 188 valid questionnaires was collected. Nearly 58% of the respondents were male, 75% were above the age 25 years old and the average time of playing was 1-2 years. The survey allowed us to know a wide range of users' motivations that next were categorized into the three value groups. In terms of functional values, users joined Second Life for learning purposes. They engage in teaching and training. Players also start businesses and create shops for making money. Corporate users join virtual worlds for conducting marketing activities such as advertising, gaining new customers and maintaining relationship with old one. Some users are motivated by virtual shopping and creating virtual objects. Experiential values include motivations like exploring the virtual world, playing and entertainment. Users can have fun and relax. They frequently want to escape from real life. Pleasure and entertainment is the primary goal for them spending time in the game, not accomplishing other tasks. Residents of Second Life also want to do what they cannot do in real life and try out different identities. Social value encompasses motivations such as meeting and interacting with new people. Residents can communicate and maintain relationships with people from around the world. Some users look for romance and cybersex.

A comparative analysis with demographic and situational factors using a Chi-square test indicated that female users are more inclined to shopping, researching or exploring Second Life and male users are more focused on making money. Younger players use Second Life for entertainment while older players for education and creating. Residents with higher education are geared to in-world research and education. Experienced users are more aware of opportunities for creating, education and commerce (Zhou et al., 2011).

Based on a literature review, Verhagen et al. (2012) pointed out the following intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of virtual world usage: economic value, ease of use, escapism, and visual attractiveness. Extrinsically motivated behavior is geared on the value of the outcome of the activity. Intrinsic motivation refers to value derived from the appreciation of the activity itself rather than its instrumental outcome.

Economic value can be defined as an evaluation and acquisition of products or services in virtual words. Ease of use was listed because social psychologists have suggested that is when players feel that they are able to interact without difficulties with an information system. An easy to use system allows players to save time and effort. They can focus on tasks in the game. Moreover, ease of use influences the degree to which players perceive the game as entertainment. In the virtual world, players are represented by digital characters (avatars). When players are absorbed by the game, they escape reality. In virtual worlds, escapism is likely to be viewed as a useful tool to support the completion of the user's tasks. In addition, escapism improves the perception of entertainment. Visual attractiveness rises extrinsic and

intrinsic reactions. In virtual worlds it impacts on the perceived usefulness and entertainment value. The attractiveness of the environment influences the time spent inside the game and the way by which tasts are completed.

Verhagen et al. (2012) conducted an online survey amongst users of Second Life ~~virtual world~~. They collected 846 correctly filled out online questionnaires. The results show that perceptions of economic value, ease of use and escapism are important drivers of both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation to use virtual worlds. The survey confirmed findings of previous motivation research, where usefulness and entertainment were recognized as principal motivations. Perceived entertainment value depends on levels of economic value, perceived ease of use and escapism. Although visual attractiveness strongly influenced entertainment value, the results did not confirm the authors' expectation that visual attractiveness also would contribute to the perceived usefulness of virtual worlds. Visual appeal improves the virtual world experience in terms of entertainment value but has no effect on the more utilitarian value such as helping a user in achieving personal tasks.

On the managers perspective, focusing only on entertaining features can be appealing for the "gaming" community, but they can lose users interested in features that help them in achieving goals. For example, boring electronic banking functions placed in virtual worlds can provide some entertainment. Placing features that are perceived as useful can exert influence on usage as well as entertainment experience. Amongst the listed motivations, escapism had a special place. Primarily people want to escape reality and forget about real life problems. Features that allow players to create and customise their avatar appearance are more important than features that make the game easier to use. Another way to attract users to virtual worlds is supporting economic activities. Game suppliers should design mechanisms that enable players to exchange currencies and make purchases. Games should contain for instance virtual bank accounts, possibilities to convert real money into virtual world currency, and visual attractive shopping malls (Verhagen et al., 2012).

Iqbal et al. (2010) carried out a qualitative case study amongst teenagers. The participants were 15 students between 13 and 15 years of age from secondary school. The authors employed questionnaires, interviews and observation of user sessions. In the questionnaires students were asked about their length of use and frequency of use of virtual worlds and were requested for some information about various virtual worlds. The authors observed users' sessions to understand the activities that players usually perform in virtual worlds. User sessions were conducted in five groups of participants. Participants were divided according to prior answers in questionnaires about significant use of a particular virtual world. Each group spent about 20 to 30 minutes in the game environment and then took part in an interview.

Iqbal et al. described students' motivation for participating in virtual worlds through the activities they performed in them and reasons for abandoning them. Students chose the following activities: chat or do things with friends, play games, explore new places, create new objects or buildings, party, purchase things, decorate their virtual space or room and visiting other's homes. The most important activities that were listed most often were: chat or do things with friends (10 times), play games (nine times), and explore new places (6 times). After that, participants listed features that they adored in the most favorable games. The features were: freedom to do things, developing their character, competing and challenges, doing things with others, exploring new places, feeling of being there and feeling of reality. The most important features which were pointed out more than 20 times are: freedom to do things, developing the character, competing and challenges. Additionally, four players indicated that they like role playing and environment mechanics in virtual worlds. Reasons for not continuing to participate in the virtual worlds were discussed in the interviews. Participants listed: needs for social networking not fulfilled by using virtual worlds, non-availability of good games, being bored, need to spend money in order to enjoy them further, not being able to understand the environment and activities, childish graphics and technical reasons (e. g. the virtual worlds do not work properly on their computer). The most important reasons were: needs for social networking not fulfilled by using virtual worlds and playing games (Iqbal et al. 2010).

Research method and characterization of the sample

In order to identify the players' motives for participation in virtual world of computer games the author carried out 22 in-depth interviews amongst polish players. To obtain the necessary information, the

interviews were held from August 21, 2018 to December 5, 2018 according to a previously prepared scenario.

The participants of the study were adult users of computer games depicting real life and based on exploring virtual world. They need to have had contact with the game at least six months before the start of the research. Before the study, the composition of the respondents' group was not yet known. Participants were invited systematically depending on which player was needed. As Hensel and Glinka (2012) suggested, the data was collected as long as theoretical saturation was obtained (another interview would not bring new information about the investigated phenomenon) (Jemielniak, 2012).

For the research three computer games were chosen: The Sims, Second Life and Euro Track Simulator 2 (Table 1).

Second Life, launched by Linden Lab (Kumar et al., 2008) is a diversified space divided into regions (Laskowska-Witek and Mitręga, 2014), containing geographic forms from the real world such as islands, buildings or institutions (Dethridge and Quinn, 2016). The player takes the form of an avatar whose appearance can be freely modified, changing the shape of the body and clothes. The game has no clear defined goal and users can do many diversified activities (Papagiannidis et al., 2008). Players can communicate with others via chat, chat voice and video conferences (Laskowska-Witek and Mitręga, 2014).

Euro Truck Simulator 2 allow players to impersonate a truck driver and modify the truck according to their own preferences. The game environment reflects the real world in a way that the player has the impression that they are really moving with the truck on real roads in Europe. The player can also set up and develop his own transport company (www.eurotrucksimulator2.com, 06.01.2019).

The Sims was produced by Maxis company and released by Electronic Arts (Kirkpatrick, 2012). It is a real life simulation and users can create and control virtual people in an arbitrary way. They place them in the houses they have designed and lead a life in the Sim community as residents of the virtual world (www.thesims.com, 04.04.2017).

Table 1. The number of users of individual games

	Initial number of players	final number of players
Second Life	12	11
Euro Truck Simulator 2	6	5
The Sims 1-4	4	3
total	22	20

Source: Author

Respondents were invited to the study from social groups created on the social networking site Facebook by game's fans. The author aimed to diversify the research sample in terms of age, gender, and place of residence among the users of each of the three games but the final composition of the sample was dependent on the players' readiness to participate in the interviews. Interviews were conducted electronically and in person. From 22 interviews, two were disqualified because during the interview participants acknowledged that they did not have contact with the game longer than half a year before the start date of the study. In the end, 20 correctly conducted interviews were obtained.

The majority of participants were men, had higher education and belonged to the age range between 20 and 30. All respondents were Polish and one person (no. 5) was currently living in London. Large variations can be seen in the respondents' place of residence and occupations. Among the 20 participants, were residents of small and large cities, blue-collar workers (e. g. production worker, mechanic), white-collar workers (e. g. IT specialists) as well as students. The information about the participants are presented in table 2.

Amongst the respondents, 6 persons play less than 5 years, 7 persons at least five years but less than 10, and 7 persons play more than 10 years.

Results

The aim of this research was to identify individual players' motives to engage in virtual reality of computer games. In order to reach the assumed goal the author carried out a 20 in-depth interviews amongst polish users of chosen computer games.

Table 2. Respondents' demographic profiles		
total number of participants		20
gender		
	female	8
	male	12
age		
	20-30	17
	31-40	0
	41-50	3
education		
	vocational	2
	secondary	6
	higher	12
Population size of participant place of residence		
	up to 20 000	2
	20 001 - 50 000	3
	50 001 - 100 000	3
	100 001 - 200 000	4
	200 001 - 500 000	2
	more than 500 000	3
Source: Author		

Table 3. Individual motivations to join virtual world

n	game	motivations to join virtual world	reasons for continuing participation in the virtual word
1	TS	ability to control life, decorating virtual space or room	enjoyment from playing
2	SL	curiosity (caused by TV series)	earning money, developing the character, opportunity to see or do things unattainable in real life
3	SL	invitation by a friend	earning money
4	SL	participation in course (at real life Jagiellonian University in Kraków)	participation in scholar project, organizing scientific conferences, meetings of student scientific clubs
5	SL	exploring the virtual world	interest in graphic design, feelings and emotions related to the virtual world
6	SL	curiosity (caused by TV programme and reporting on Youtube.com), feelings and emotions related to the virtual world	ability to control life, exploring the virtual world, spending free time
7	SL	invitation by a friend, spending free time	spending free time, interact with others, opportunity to see or do things unattainable in real life
8	SL	curiosity (caused by TV programme)	-
9	SL	work in game developing (programmer, developing SL browser)	developing the character, buying virtual products and services
10	ETS2	enjoyment from playing	-
11	SL	escapism (difficult childhood, problems in communication with peers from the real world)	exploring the virtual world, interacting with others
12	TS	possibility of building and creating	decorating virtual space or room
13	ETS2	interest in the topic of a game (drive a track), quality of a game (very extensive map in ETS)	-
14	ETS2	interest in the topic of a game (drive a track, respondent is a car mechanic)	-
15	TS	popularity of game amongst peers	-
16	ETS2	interest in the topic of a game, feeling of reality	-
17	TS	feeling of reality	possibility of building and creating, spending free time
18	SL	enjoyment from playing, curiosity (caused by advertisement)	opportunity to see or do things unattainable in real life, interacting with others
19	ETS2	interest in the topic of a game (drive a track), quality of a game (a large number of modifications to the game), interacting with others	-
20	SL	curiosity (article in newspaper)	interacting with others, improvement of language skills

Source: Author

Respondents were asked why they decided to join virtual worlds. The answers are gathered in table 3. Sometimes players mentioned additional reasons why they stay in virtual world. These answers were treated as additional motives for engaging in virtual reality of computer games. These motives are placed in the second column of the table.

Respondents most frequently consecutively mentioned: curiosity (caused by TV series, TV programme, newspaper or advertisement), interacting with others, interest in the topic of a game, enjoyment from playing, opportunity to see or do things unattainable in real life, exploring the virtual world, spending free time.

The initial motives can sometimes be changed over some period of time, for example user number 2, at first start playing because of curiosity and after that he played to earn money. He most likely did not know at the beginning about the possibilities of the virtual world that he joined.

With reference to the gratification paradigm individual motivations can be divided into functional, experiential and social motives. The most numerous group of motives is experiential (16 motives): ability to control life, decorating virtual space or room, enjoyment from playing, curiosity (caused by TV series, TV programme, newspaper or advertisement), developing the character, opportunity to see or do things unattainable in real life, exploring the virtual world, interest in graphic design, spending free time, feelings and emotions related to virtual world, buying virtual products or services, escapism, possibility of building and creating, interest in the topic of a game, quality of a game, feeling of reality. Second place are the functional type of motives (6 drivers): earning money, participation in real life courses, participation in scholar project or/and conferences, meetings of student scientific clubs, work in game developing, improvement of language skills. The third type encompass social motives (3 drivers): invitation by a friend, interacting with others, popularity of game amongst peers. It can be said that people joining virtual worlds most frequently are guided by emotional factors. Secondly, users engage in virtual worlds because they allow them to conduct activities like earning money or participate in courses and lectures.

The results are also important for practice. An understanding of personal motivations gives marketers an outlook on consumers' needs and wants. It is important not only for marketing managers but also for game developers. From a marketing managers perspective, understanding players motivations allow them to describe the target market of their promotional activities inside the game environment. In terms of game developers, it can help attract new and maintain current users. Game producers can adjust appropriate advertising messages that emphasize the features that potential customers want to hear. For instance, promotional messages should arise curiosity in customers because respondents mentioned this motive very frequently.

Conclusions

The presented study investigated individual players' motives to join virtual reality computer games. The results show that people join virtual worlds not only for obvious reasons like exploring virtual worlds, escaping from real life, meeting new people or for entertainment purposes but also to engage in creating game elements like places or objects. Players admitted that they make money inside the game by selling virtual products, developing new virtual places where they rent a commercial space for other users' businesses. They participate in lectures as a part of virtual course in real life universities and run scholar projects and organize conferences. Game users also organize various cultural and charity events. Some players' try to moderate the game by producing branded items and sharing these with others through external websites.

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