

PUBLICATION & RESEARCH

Jennifer L. Robinette

Our lives and relationships are increasingly maintained through mediated channels of communication, many of which are described as “interactive.” What is it that makes an experience interactive? What impact is this change in our communication having on us? My research interests encompass interactivity, the Internet, computer-mediated-communication, empathy and cyber-bullying behavior, technology use and effects, mass media effects, and cognitive and educational psychology. My dissertation is entitled “Understanding Interactive Experiences: Perceived Interactivity and Presence with and without Other Avatars in the Online Virtual World Second Life.” One of the exciting things about being at Concord University is that there is an immersive Virtual Environment (VE) in the Rahall Technology Center. This kind of system is extremely expensive and complex to construct.

Many of the interactivity articles in my dissertation research were on studies conducted using similar systems at universities in California, Denmark and Sweden. Concord’s system will enable me to conduct experiments comparing interactive experiences on desktop computers with those in which our senses are immersed in the VE. A research program of this kind will enhance understanding of interactivity and attract the interest of computer and communication technology companies. My dissertation is complete and was accepted by the University of Kentucky Graduate School on April 25, 2011. It was published on UKnowledge June 6, 2011. It is ready to be broken down and submitted in parts to academic journals.



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Dissertation

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Communication

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Dr. Donald O. Case

Abstract

Interactivity research lacks consensus regarding the qualities and consequences of interactive experiences. Empirical proof is needed to substantiate the numerous interactivity theories and provide direction for new media technology developers. Specifically, there is a shortage of research on differences between user experiences of interactivity when technology enables communication versus when it does not. In addition, interactivity research is often confounded by the construct of presence.

This study's objectives included: 1) identifying qualities associated with interactive experiences; 2) disambiguating the constructs of interactivity and presence; and 3) developing a measure of perceived interactivity for VW research. The experimental design measured perceived interactivity and presence following completion of a simple task in the online Virtual World (VW) known as Second Life. It was hypothesized that both perceived interactivity and presence would be greater for subjects encountering avatars believed to be controlled by other people than for subjects encountering no other avatars in the VW. A total of 180 subjects from the University of Kentucky participated in a 2 by 4 factorial experiment. Perceived interactivity was measured by modifying McMillan and Hwang's Measure of Perceived Interactivity for the VW context.

Two essential qualities of interactive experiences were identified: Responsiveness and engagement. These qualities are characteristic of unmediated, FTF conversation, which was perceived as the most interactive communication context above technologies routinely described as interactive. Decreased responsiveness of technology at a second study venue caused significant decline in perceived interactivity, demonstrating the importance of a technology's reaction speed and control provided to the user. Significant main effects for perceived interactivity due to encountering other avatars were confounded by interaction effects due to differences in technology responsiveness. Interactivity and presence appear to be separate psychological constructs which covary in the context of a new media experience. Implications and directions for future research are discussed.

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