Furry Ex Machina: How does VRChat allow for modern instances of digital identity generation and immersion in the furry fandom?

Reuben Mount

Birmingham City University

15 Bartholomew Row

Birmingham, England

Reuben.Mount@mail.bcu.ac.uk

Keywords

Virtual reality, embodiment, immersion, avatars, furry fandom

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This work proposes examining the social virtual reality (VR) platform, *VRChat* (VRChat, 2014) as a contemporary site of online avatar embodiment for the furry fandom, and through doing so contribute to the growing discussions around this platform as a site of potential social connectedness (Deighan et al, 2023), examinations in terms of embodiment and immersion (Asshoff, 2022), or as discussed via experimentation with avatars as a form of identity formation (Montemorano, 2020), among others. Whilst some might argue that VRChat is not a video game, if we draw upon the advanced topography of games outlined by Aarseth et al. (2003), *VRChat* fulfils the criteria of being a video game as a 1st person, multiplayer game with dynamic environments and infinite teleology and therefore worthy of examination through this lens.

Alongside the discussions above around VRChat, and as hinted with Asshoff's work, is the link between embodiment and immersion – the latter of which is greatly contested in academia. For instance, Brown and Cairns (2004) are drawn upon for their model on the different stages of immersion; engagement, engrossment, and total immersion in many works about video games (Jennett, et al., 2008; Michailidis, et al., 2018). This model of immersion does fail to acknowledge the differences in modes of involvement with the game texts (Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005), which arguably leads to an arguable lack of universality to their claims. However, there are elements of this model that have been built upon that are prudent to use in the examination of VR games.

A particular discursive point Brown and Cairns' statement that the highest stage of immersion results in 'participants describ[ing] being cut off from reality and detachment to such an extent that the game was all that mattered' (2004: 1299). This total immersion is described as a fleeting experience, and it is the player's level of attention that is the primary cause of distraction from this state. Given the encompassing nature of the technology used for VR games, it could be argued that there is less capacity for distraction with this mode of involvement. As such, there is a possibility that an examination of *VRChat* – and VR games generally – could provide the opportunity to analyse this "highest stage" in a less fleeting fashion.

The furry fandom has been chosen as the community to be studied in this regard due to the status of the group as a predominantly online community. Although it has its beginnings in sci-fi conventions of the 1960s and 70s, the community has actively embraced various advancements in online communication. This began with the adoption of Multi-User Construction Kits (MUCKs) in the 1990s to communicate with each other online via text and was also an early example of the community embodying their fursonas – anthropomorphic animal avatars - through descriptive text. The next leap for the community was *Second Life* (Linden Lab, 2003), which then allowed for the community to further embody their fursonas and now visually, however through a third person perspective.

Furthermore, the furry fandom is distinct in that a large percentage of the community interact with each other via these avatars. This allows the placing of this potential examination outside the previous works discussed on *VRChat* as these previously discussed this embodiment within the platform without specifically including the personal attachments to the avatars as a key factor. This runs contrary to the furry fandom who often see their fursona as either an extension of themselves or an ideal self. So, as and initial observations, *VRChat* could be the next stage in this ongoing embodiment for the furry fandom, especially given the game's flexibility in customisation of avatars and the potential for this customisation to build immersion with players (Ting, 2010).

This customisation allows the player to create – or have created by request to an artist – a 3D model of their fursona in which they can place themselves where multi-media technologies substitute interactions with the outside world (Herbelin, at al., 2016). In *VRChat*, this not only comprises of the physical interactions with the game world through the technology itself, but through the documented use of body language and non-verbal communication between people with gesticulations being used during interactions or, as Asshoff (2022) states, the mimicry of the behaviours through the replication of physical action to digital action. It should be highlighted here that the levels of embodiment experienced will differ between the full VR and non-VR desktop modes of the game, however this does not negate the proposed direction of this work.

Wider implications and goals of this future work would be further interrogation of VRChat as a site of embodiment for players of the game and to highlight the increased immersive capabilities of this game as a potential site for Brown and Cairns (2004) proposed state of "total immersion". Also, as mentioned earlier, this would work to fill the gap in literature on *VRChat* in that it proposes looking at a specific community that arguably uniquely uses embodiment compared to the previous investigations into identity generation and immersion. Furthermore, this work would contribute to the currently scant literature studying *VRChat* and the far lower amount of academic works examining the furry fandom, furry media and furry video games.

REFERENCES

Aarseth, E., Smedstad, S.M. and Sunnanå, L. 2003. *A multidimensional typology of games*. In DiGRA Conference, November 2003.

Asshoff, R. 2022. Welcome to VR Chat: An ethnographic study on embodiment and immersion in virtual reality. Masters thesis. Stockholm University, Sweden.

Brown, E. and Cairns, P. 2004. A grounded investigation of game immersion. In *CHI'04 extended abstracts on Human factors in computing systems*, pp. 1297-1300.

Deighan, M.T., Ayobi, A. and O'Kane, A.A. 2023. Social Virtual Reality as a Mental Health Tool: How People Use VRChat to Support Social Connectedness and Wellbeing. In *Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, pp.1-13.

Ermi, L. and Mäyrä, F. 2005. Player-centred game design: Experiences in using scenario study to inform mobile game design, *Game Studies*, 5(1), pp.1-10.

Herbelin, B., Salomon, R., Serino, A. and Blanke, O. 2016. Neural Mechanisms of Bodily Self-Consciousness and the Experience of Presence in Virtual Reality, *Human Computer Confluence*, pp.80-96. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110471137-005.

Jennett, C., Cox, A.L., Cairns, P., Dhoparee, S., Epps, A., Tijs, T. and Walton, A. 2008. Measuring and defining the experience of immersion in games, *International journal of human-computer studies*, 66(9), pp.641-661.

Linden Labs. 2003. *Second Life.* Online Game. Linden Labs.

Michailidis, L., Balaguer-Ballester, E. and He, X. 2018. Flow and Immersion in Video Games: The Aftermath of a Conceptual Challenge, *Frontiers of Psychology*, 9:1682. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01682.

Montemorano, C. 2020. Body Language: Avatars, Identity Formation, and Communicative Interaction in VRChat in *Student Research Submissions*, 361. University of Mary Washington, USA.

Stockselius, C. 2023. Social Interaction in Virtual Reality: Users' experience of social interaction in the game VRChat. Masters thesis. University of Skövde, Sweden.

Thibault, M. and Bujić, M. 2022. "Mirror Dwellers": Social VR, Identity and Internet Culture. DiGRA 2022.

Ting, C. 2010. Customization, immersion satisfaction, and online gamer loyalty, *Computers in Human Behaviour*, 26, pp.1547-1554.

VRChat. 2014. *VRChat*. Online Game. VRChat.