Two Routes to Research and their Implications for Avatar-based Interviewing

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Keywords

Theory, Critical research, Qualitative research, Youth, Avatars, Avatar-based Interviewing

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of game studies is at a crossroads. In approaching gameplay as a point of encounter during qualitative research, we immediately face the question of either (a) using avatars as a methodological tool to understand participants, or else (b) relating with our participants via avatars in a collaborative spirit. In our paper, we first outline two different routes to research (Route 1 and Route 2), which reflect the above approaches. We then present a study that engaged with youth via avatar-based interviewing in order to understand how they view their identity. Finally, we engage in meta-reflection on the implications of interpreting our findings via Route 1 or Route 2. We conclude that Route 2 reflects a more critical and comprehensive approach to games studies, which the DiGRA community will find useful as it grapples philosophically with the various facets of the political in game studies.

TWO ROUTES

In articulating the distinction between mainstream/descriptive research and critical/political research, game studies has grappled with issues relating to the opportunities offered by, and the limits of, method. We contend that the different approaches implied herein can be subsumed under two routes. Route 1 holds that research ultimately constitutes a methodological unfolding (e.g., switching between nomothetic and idiographic pursuits, quantitative and qualitative pursuits, etc., in complementary ways) that can have largely descriptive aspirations and yield incremental advances in our knowledge. Route 2 holds that research practices imply a deeper appreciation of the decisions made along the way and of the entanglement between research methodologies and the political, thus inviting a more hermeneutic

approach to research. Whilst this distinction was developed in psychology, it is of relevance to the social sciences including game studies (Buhagiar, under review).

In essence, Route 1 errs on the side of a relatively uninvolved attitude and reads research as requiring an epistemological stance that enables methodological unfolding and self-correction over different findings over time. In contrast, Route 2 extends the research dynamic to more-than-methodological considerations and embraces the accompanying epistemological and political affordances that emerge. It is sensitive to the risks that emerge when the political/power is sidelined – namely risks relating to the perpetuation of irrelevant conceptual artefacts. Route 2 also holds the idea of social scientific self-correction with suspicion and favours a hermeneutic stance instead.

AVATAR-BASED INTERVIEWING WITH THE GAMING GENERATION IN MALTA

We discuss these two routes in view of a qualitative study conducted amongst 23 youth (14 years old) across schools in Malta. In this study, we engaged with youth in a dialogue on their understanding of self-identity and their lived reality. These topics were queried via Avatar-based Interviewing (Pulis & Buhagiar, under review). This approach involved having participants (a) create an avatar in the game, (b) describe the avatar, and (c) highlight points of convergence and divergence between the avatar and themselves. This allowed participants to discuss difficult topics through the avatar, using language that drew upon the representational repertoires they often encountered online (e.g., when gaming, chatting, etc.).

The avatar-based interviewing was part of a broader inquiry that also incorporated gameplay design by participants themselves (Aupers et al., 2017). The overall data were analysed using thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001), and in this paper we present solely the initial findings that emerged from avatar-based interviewing. From the avatar-based interviews, the themes that emerged highlighted the uniqueness of the person, the idea of being survivors, and the craving of a simple life.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

After presenting the findings, our paper proceeds by applying Route 1 (methodological sophistication) and Route 2 (more-than-methodological elaboration) to the interpretation of the findings. In conclusion, we reflect on the implications of interpreting our findings via Route 1 and via Route 2. Route 1 pushes us toward an understanding of (a) the themes as *findings*, (b) the themes as *standalone outputs*, (c) the interview process as gameplay-based *protocol*, and (d) future directions as referring to potential game studies *research questions*. In contrast, Route 2 invites us to consider (a) the themes as *co-constructions*, (b) the themes as *contextualized hermeneutics*, (c) the interview experience as gameplay-based *encounter*, and (d) future directions as queries into game studies *research questions and critical practice*. This shift in viewpoint – favouring Route 2 as more critical and comprehensive – carries significant implications for our philosophical approach to the practice of game studies, chiefly by reframing research as being always more-than-methodological.

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