

GAME DESIGN, ART, RESOURCES, RESEARCH,  
CRITICISM, TUTORIALS & STUFF BY ANJIN ANHUT.



, May 15, 2011 [<http://howtonotsuckatgamedesign.com/?p=2806>] by Anjin Anhut.



How an understanding of Symbolic Creativity and publicity can make item shops worth the money.

### Symbolic Creativity

Paul Willis a sociologist and writer defined a term, which comes in quite handy for many designers in all fields of visual design. Symbolic Creativity [1], and i'm paraphrasing here, defines cultural artifacts (media, clothing, language, groups, body-modifications, imagery and all that) as products of activity and imagination. All cultural artifacts created by, consumed by, modified by and adapted by a person is this person's activity and imagination, and therefore displays this person's personality.

People do this Symbolic Creativity thing with themselves and their surroundings everyday, even if they don't realize it. There is a very conscious way to do that by picking your clothes or haircut and there is a very casual even unconscious way by picking which movie to go to or how often you clean up your room. People can't avoid expressing themselves via Symbolic Creativity, because it comes from their activity and imagination. As long as you are active and your activity is shaped by your own imagination (free will, decision making), you are expressing yourself.

Reverse-engineering this principle allows designers to add cultural artifacts to characters and environments to illustrate a character's inside personality. What does the clothing of the character tell us? What does this tattoo tell us? What does the body language tell us? Designers can systematically go through such questions and try to answer them in their designs to support the desired narrative.

### Symbolic Creativity And Socializing

Humans, being a social animal, use Symbolic Creativity to signal group affiliation and social status. In-your-face group affiliation signals like uniforms or merchandise for fans work as well as subtle and subconscious signals, like body-language, verbal language, physical condition, or how old your shoes are. What we experience as instant sympathy or interest when we first meet people is basically us reading the Symbolic Creativity of the person in front of us and finding signals that allow us to affiliate with this person.

Marketers heavily capitalize on the power of Symbolic Creativity and the human urge to socialize by creating trends. Trends suggest that there is a certain artifact of Symbolic Creativity, that if you support it, you can belong to a large group. "Everybody is doing it!" "A must-have!". Or they use celebrity testimonies so you buy a product, let's say a fragrance, to share a similar Symbolic Creativity with your adored movie star and affiliate with him. And so on.

### Symbolic Creativity In Virtual Worlds

In the physical world your Symbolic Creativity is limited by your resources. You can't get ripped like Dwayne Johnson because you have an 8h office job and a family to care for. You can't affiliate with super rich sports stars because you can't afford the 200\$ Nikies. Or on a more fundamental level, you can't affiliate with the girls because you have a penis. These limitations leave a lot of desires unfulfilled, often essential desires to the person's well being and psychological health or social acceptance.

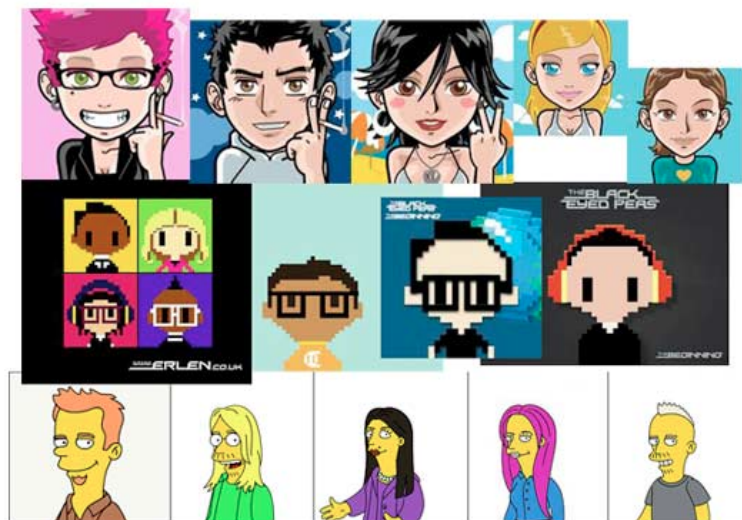
Social networks, Facebook, Xbox Live, Imvu, blogs, forums and online multi player games (which are social networks with a special set of possible activities) live on the Symbolic Creativity and the urge to socialize of their users. Viral marketing does too. Sharing content, you like, is an expression of what you like and part of your self-image. Sharing this content publicly on your Facebook wall is an open call for group affiliation. And so is your avatar that represents you in the digital realms.

Social networks add a well embraced additional feature to your Symbolic Creativity: publicity. The possibility to make your activities and imagination visible for hundreds, thousands, possible millions of people and open calling the world to affiliate with you. I'd like to refer to this combination of Symbolic Creativity and publicity as creative socializing.

Creative socializing, this is where virtual worlds are able to provide truly meaningful content. Ripped like the Rock with a click on a button, 200\$ Nikies for a tiny amount of Facebook credits and a transgender experience [2] with no charge.

Avatar customization and item-selling offer not just pixelated bric-a-brac. They offer means of self-definition and expression of real-world group affiliation. And often enough not as easily obtained or not in reach at all in the physical world.[3]

Check out the additional reading below learn more on Symbolic Creativity and its importance and personal value in virtual worlds.



avatar creation tools like Manga-ize Yourself or the avatar creator used to virally promote the Simpsons feature film are widely popular.

You probably have seen many products of such tools on facebook or other forums and communities already.

### Use And Abuse

Many designers of successful social games (including MMOs) know of the emotional driving force that is creative socializing. Unfortunately some use this knowledge not to satisfy their users but to basically force them to do stuff. They employ systems like ranks and guilds to actively encourage peer pressure or they have the game actively corrupt the player's virtual self-image to basically blackmail him into revisiting the game on a regular basis.

In my judgement a very mean example is Pet Society. Where if your pet, if you don't regularly revisit the game, gets dirty, smelly and sad, even going so far as to have flies surround your pet like a heap of poo. First they encourage you to customize your pet so it becomes the most personal of possible expressions, the most accurate image of you, and then they corrupt your image, making you look like shit. Not cool. This in my view is where we reach abuse territory.

### Fulfilling Desires

Now moving on to the cool stuff. I'd like to define four ways in which creative socializing features (avatar customization tools, environment customization) can provide meaningful tools to the player or user and make buying items worth the money. Those for qualities are not mutually exclusive, they complement each other and it is often hard to draw a clear line between them.

#### • basic self-image

The user wants to simply create a recognizable avatar for himself. Skin color, basic shapes, physical condition, age, hair color and structure, eye color and facial features should be able to be set in a way that resembles the actual appearance of the user. For this heavily stylized avatars tend to be more accepting for the viewer. If the viewer has to fill the gap between the cartoonish image of a person and the photorealistic appearance of the person anyway, he fills the gap in the to him most convincing way. [4] That's why Xbox Live avatars or Miis work so well.

Almost photorealistic avatars focus the viewer on checking facial features and facial movement, expression and other things in a very close comparison to the original with little to no gaps to fill. This comparison is most of the time doomed to fail, since the smallest differences can make the avatar copy appear flawed, inconsistent or strange.

#### • expressive self-image

This is the area where the user uses his Symbolic Creativity in a conscious way. Clothing, accessories, body modifications, items, hair cuts, hair dye are used to style up the avatar in a way that most accurately represents the personality of the user. To satisfy this need, customizing tools need to provide a wide range of styling items to choose. A neat trick here is to make certain items artificially hard to get, rare, or even expensive to obtain, to create virtual luxury items. Scarcity actually raises an object's value even in the digital world. [5]

#### • fictional self-image

He the user wants to create either an alternate version of himself or a "true" version of himself. Either way the user wants to overcome the limitations of the physical world and the paradigms of the real world society and become someone else from who he is currently allowed to be. The possible differences between the user and his avatar can't be wide enough in customization tools, that hope to fulfill this desire. Genders need to be matter of choice, even if the user prefers to have no gender at all or both genders at once. Race and even species should be a matter of choice so the user can be super-human or even something completely non-human.

World Of Warcraft offers exactly that kind of choices and provides a world, in which live and explore how it feels to be a creature with the appearance and gender of your own choosing. In my opinion it is a great loss that Dragon Age 2 confines it's players into human forms.

#### • likable second-person-image

Outside of the realms of creative socializing there is another desire to mention, that only refers to personal narrative experiences such as single player games. The desire to have an ingame character that is attractive for the player. When

I played as a female Shepard in Mass Effect I wasn't concerned about impressing others with my creativity. I just wanted her to look good, since I knew I was in for approx 40h of looking at her in the campaign.

### Wrapping Things Up

Symbolic Creativity, everybody does it and everybody reacts to others doing it.

For game designers it is important to understand the social importance of self-expression via Symbolic Creativity and the intriguing possibilities of a virtual world where the means to express yourself are practically limitless. Adding the publicity that online communities and MMOs provide and you got a very very attractive package for social animals like us. I wish everybody, who sees business opportunities in catering to this fundamental desires, to be able to provide fulfilling solutions and to make good money with it. Just don't go out and blackmail your users by distorting their personal expression until they pay you or give you your precious MAUs [6].



Thanks. Questions and comments are very much welcome.

Appendix:

[1]Paul Willis on symbolic creativity is part of his book [Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young](#). The principles of symbolic creativity are widely recognized used among graphics designers, fashion designers and artists. You can read an [abstract here](#).

[2]There is an interesting movement connected to the virtual avatars in games and online communities and also cyberpunk literature and movies. The movement is referred to as [cyber feminism](#) and while not having an official manifesto often deals with gender issues, focussing on the contrast between the real life social gender limitations and the freedom of gender in virtual environments.

[3]A great [New York Times slideshow](#) of people and their virtual counterparts, that shows how much meaning the freedom to re-imagine oneself can have for players.

[4]The high believability of skilled stylization in comparison to the weaker photorealistic approach gets explained very very well in Scott McCloud's acclaimed book [Understanding Comics](#). You can have a look at a great selection of [avatar editors here](#) and check for yourself how the stylized ones connect in contrast to the realistic ones.

[5]If you want to know more about the selling power of artificial scarcity, I recommend [M.Nerukar's talk](#) on the qualities of virtual goods.

[6]For those who don't know: MAU stands for monthly active user. MAU's are almost like a currency to social app and game providers, since they indicate the reach and retention, the popularity of the app in question. Many MAUs speak for a popular product and therefore raise the financial value of the product and the company.

## ONE THOUGHT ON “MEANINGFUL AVATAR CUSTOMIZATION”



Svet

on [June 12, 2011 at 2:56 pm](#) said:

Here are my two cents on the subject:

Have you ever thought that having too much control over your avatar actually distances you from it? In most cases your avatar is a on character design to look like you with one main goal- to make you feel more attached to the onscreen experience. I feel like the main reason avatars on Wii work and those on the xbox don't is because the ones on xbox have way too much things you can add to them.

The things that your avatar needs in order to be “you” are some of the most basic superficial features that you could be recognized by – Body contour, color and some basic facial features: eyes, nose, lips, eyebrows, ears.

This is something Wii avatars do well unlike xbox avatars. On the xbox you can add a huge variety of accessories, many kinds of clothing, and attachments.

I feel like that's what distances me from those avatars.

When you put so much character into your avatar it goes from being an empty canvas, goes through being “you” and jumps into being it's own self. The small thing on the screen that is supposed to attach you into your game is now a character with which you interact. It is now it's own being and you feel almost like you need to feed it 3 times a day and take it for a walk.

That's how I feel anyway :)

p.s. I wrote this even before I read your article lol It's not entirely 100% as you said it, so I hope there is a small bit of my own view added to the matter :)

What you said was that imperfection brakes the illusion that the avatar is you and what I said was that too much detail creates a character of your avatar and you are no longer attached to it, but forced to watch it from distance .