



PANEL

Peopled Online Virtual Worlds: A New Home for Cooperating Communities, a New Frontier for Interaction Design

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ABSTRACT

Multi-user virtual worlds are proliferating on the Internet. These are two and three dimensional graphical environments inhabited by users represented as digital actors called "avatars". Through this new medium for cooperating communities, a wide variety of Internet users are participating in a large scale social experiment and collaborating on a variety of projects. The inhabited virtual world is an exciting new medium for HCI professionals including interaction and graphic designers, and educators and researchers focused on distance learning and teleworking. It also appeals to children and ordinary users of the Internet as a vast new digital playground and a venue for personal expression. This panel will present a brief overview the inhabited virtual world medium and then discuss its merits and limitations as a medium for cooperating communities and interaction design.

Keywords

virtual worlds, social computing, avatars, collaborative workspaces, VRML, three dimensional interfaces, multi-user virtual reality, Internet

INTRODUCTION

For the past two years, the Internet has played host to a new medium: the multi-user virtual world. These environments are graphically rendered in two or three dimensions and represent the presence of participants as digital characters known as "avatars". Participants navigate their avatars through these digital spaces, communicate with other users, build structures, teach, learn, and engage in a variety of collaborative activities. On-line virtual worlds represent a new frontier for cooperating community, interaction design, computer supported cooperative work and learning and touch upon many other areas of HCI.

This panel will provide a brief overview of multi-user virtual worlds followed by a discussion their merits and limitations as medium for cooperating communities and interaction design.

Origins of the virtual worlds medium

This technology could be seen as a graphical extension of MUD and MOO environments but it exhibits some of its own unique characteristics, including:

- Shared social environments with an emergent subculture centered around a visual environment
- Collaborative construction of large scale spaces including buildings and cityscapes, artwork, fields of digital biota and soundscapes
- The mixing of web-based newspapers and other community services with three dimensional community spaces

Virtual worlds also borrow from both the virtual reality and computer gaming field. However, this medium does not require the kind of immersive equipment (such as head mounted displays) found in virtual reality systems. In addition, virtual worlds employ fast 3-D graphic rendering engines found in gaming environments but their application is almost purely social or creative. Avatars do not generally die or kill other avatars in virtual worlds.

THE VIRTUAL WORLDS TO BE REVIEWED

The overview and panel discussion will examine several virtual world environments, including: AlphaWorld, CyberHub, the Palace, Traveler Utopia, Virtual Places, V-Chat, general VRML 2.0 environments and others which become available by the time of the conference. Within the virtual worlds, special areas will be visited on-line to bring the live experience of the medium and its users to the audience and panel. The Virtual University server within AlphaWorld will be staffed by discussants who can join the panelists and seen in-avatar by CSCW participants.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR THE PANEL

The virtual world medium poses great challenges for cultural interface and interaction design. In addition, the medium can mirror real human society and thereby can evolve into a global social experiment. As with any new medium, before standards and basic paradigms emerge, there are far more questions than answers:

- Does a peopled virtual world constitute a real community of interest?

- Does the medium have useful applications in learning or work, or will it be permanently relegated to a glorified form of chat?
- How do people choose to represent themselves in a virtual world, what roles do they play, and what is their purpose for doing so?
- What community rules and norms have emerged in these environments?
- What are some of the key design issues: what makes a good virtual space and an effective communication interface?
- Are virtual worlds a symptom of and escape from problems of personal alienation and isolation in our society, or are they a new form of human contact contributing to an emerging “global village”?

DISCUSSANTS

Panel discussants will include representatives from the virtual world vendor community and the research community focused on CSCW and CSCL. Virtual participants will join the panel from their vantage point inside a virtual world, contributing as discussants or members of the audience.

REFERENCES

User experiences in design and collaboration through the virtual world medium are extensively documented on the World Wide Web at <http://www.ccon.org>.