

SOCIAL MEDIA AS VIDEO GAMES: HOW WE ACT AS FIRST PERSON PAPARAZZI AND WHY IT MATTERS¹

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Social media are video games.

There, I said it.

This proclamation does not make me popular at cocktail parties or in the company of most professors and students. I receive looks of complete bewilderment and disgust. But the one group that does appreciate my interpretation is gamers. When I speak with video gamers they agree with me. They too wonder why more people cannot see the similarities between social media and video games. Heavy gamers, obsessed with living in a different reality and chipping away at digital goals are not that different from heavy social media users, hoping for validation or aspiring toward fame in the digital social world. Both are immersed in alternate realities, navigating their way through presented tasks and expectations. While gamers are frequently labeled nerds, geeks, anti-social, and even violent, social media users are rarely given these labels, if at all. Yes, social media addicts are often called narcissistic or distracted, but they are not ostracized from “normal” social contexts. In fact, the more common question is not “why are you on social media?” but “why are you *not*?”

I am not claiming that social media are *exactly* the same as video games. But that, in many ways, social media provide video-game-like experiences. This overlap is important to recognize because social media and video games are traditionally studied using two different sets of theory and method. They are also viewed quite differently in the social world—they are branded, marketed, and used in divergent ways. Although some video games *are* perceived as having social media qualities (users can chat with friends while playing, join strangers to complete a common task, or play games that are MMOs or massively multiplayer online games), social media are not commonly thought of as having video game qualities. To be clear, I am not talking about playing games on social media—no Candy Crush Saga or Farmville discussion will ensue. I am claiming that, just as we play video games, we *play* social media.

When we begin to view social media as similar to video games, many fresh perspectives will be revealed that may help us to uncover new caveats to the processes and implications of social networks. Once we buy into the idea that social media provide video-game-like experiences, we can develop new questions. I want to highlight two main points that demonstrate the importance of using video games as a new lens through which to view social media.

First, this new lens allows us to see that there are distinct affordances that we are offered when creating our identities through the sites. Just as Mario cannot walk off of the screen and we cannot select which Tetris block falls next, we only have so much say in what information is requested, the ways it is prioritized, and how it is presented. Second, we can begin to understand that the point of social media sites is to immerse users and ask them to suspend disbelief. Gamers accept that they are entering another reality; they want to block out distractions and become immersed in the created world. Social media users, on the other hand, are expected to view

¹ Themes in this paper were first explored in Cirucci, A. M. (2013). First person paparazzi: Why social media should be studied more like video games. *Telematics and Informatics*, 30(1), 47-59. doi: 10.1016/j.tele.2012.03.006

contemporary social networking sites as though they represent a close one-to-one relationship to offline interactions.

We can explore the importance of these assertions and how applying video game logic to social media will help us to traverse them. But first, I must convince you that social media are like video games.

EXAMPLE: WORLD OF WARCRAFT AND FACEBOOK

To highlight the overlap, I want to focus on two particular media that will act as case studies and represent the larger themes within social media and video games. These are extreme examples and were chosen for that reason. Other media certainly apply.

As a video game example, I will be mostly referring to World of Warcraft (WoW). WoW is a MMORPG, or a massively multiplayer online role playing game. This means that gamers sign on to servers where they can interact with other gamers, both socially and in order to complete in-game quests and achievements. It also means that gamers take on new personae, traveling through the game world as “characters” that they have customized, in both looks and skill sets.

As a social media example, I will be mostly referring to Facebook. Facebook is currently one of the most popular social networking platforms. By the beginning of 2014, the social networked boasted 1.23 billion monthly active users, 757 million of them logging in daily². Users can customize profiles, post status updates, upload pictures, join groups, create events, and so on. Beyond its large subscriber base, I have chosen Facebook as the case study for two main reasons. First, it allows users to perform identity in a number of ways, mimicking aspects of other platforms, such as the status update from Twitter and the photo upload from Instagram. Second, Facebook allows the folding in of many apps, acting as a type of “tentpole” medium³ that supports other internet activity more generally, and other social media usage more specifically.

To highlight the similarities between Facebook and WoW, I will break each down into their three main parts: setup, play, and goals. This breakdown will allow for a more thorough comparison and for a better analysis of social media later—it illuminates some important aspects of using social networking that perhaps have become second-nature and thus invisible.

The Setup

To begin playing WoW the gamer must design an avatar. This is the toon-like representation of the gamer that travels through the game world. In WoW, a user can choose from “classes” such as Mage, Hunter, and Priest and “races” such as Dwarf, Night Elf, or Orc. She can also choose if she would like her avatar to look stereotypically female or stereotypically male. Physical features can be further customized through options such as skin color, hair style, and hair color. Finally, the gamer selects a username for her avatar. This username is almost always a playful name that does not, at least not explicitly, identify the gamer behind the avatar.

² <http://investor.fb.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=821954>

³ Cirucci, A. M. (2012, October). Exploring Facebook’s success through presence. Paper presented at the International Society for Presence Research Conference, Philadelphia, PA. Paper available at http://www.temple.edu/ispr/prev_conferences/proceedings/2012/17_Cirucci.pdf

To begin using Facebook, the new user completes a similar process. Facebook first asks that the new user input her real name, email address, gender, and birthday. Unlike WoW, Facebook's Terms of Service requires users to enter their legal first and last names; this full name is then publically accessible⁴. Once the new user completes the first page, she can begin to customize her profile. Similar to WoW, an integral part of the profile is the physical appearance. Therefore, Facebook highly recommends that the new user upload a profile picture, or the main picture that is displayed in the top left hand corner of the profile page and that also shows up as a thumbnail in all searches. If a user chooses to not upload a profile picture, a silhouette of a male or female bust will appear (depending on the gender selected at sign up⁵). Users are also invited to fill out a plethora of personal information at first login. Options include, but are not limited to: location, relationship status, place of employment, and education history. As in WoW, these initial decisions help to start the process of crafting the Facebook user's narrative.

Play

The second stage, playing, encompasses most of the time that gamers and users spend while on their respective media. In WoW, gamers work to complete quests, make friends, join a guild (group), and develop their in-game status. Making friends and joining a good guild is integral, especially as the gamer enters into higher levels of the game—many upper level achievements require groups to fulfill. Major achievements in the game can be viewed by all players, acting as a sort of wall of accomplishments for the gamer. Because the game is not linear, gamers are invited to make their own choices to craft the unique narrative of their avatars.

Playing the game through completing quests and achievements also allows gamers to collect and wear better gear. These may include items such as weapons, armor, and mounts. Although many gear items can be purchased for earned gold (the WoW currency) or traded on the auction house, the most prestigious gear can only be earned by completing special quests, achievements, and raids.

Similarly, to play Facebook, users first build their network of friends. This is the most obvious use of Facebook, because it is a *social* network. Without friends the site becomes almost impossible to use because it is first and foremost a place for social interaction. As on WoW, Facebook users are invited to craft their life narrative. With the added Timeline feature, users can trace their lives back to birth, adding "Life Events" to denote milestones. These exist on the Timeline as a list of special moments and a highlighted way of showing off accomplishments. Further, users can always change their profile picture, or add many pictures through albums and integrated apps to help tell their story. Facebookers can upload pictures of new "gear"—items such as clothing, electronics, automobiles, or jewelry—that they feel help to define who they are, what they have accomplished, or what they aspire to be.

⁴ In October of 2009, Blizzard Entertainment, the owners of World of Warcraft, made it mandatory for users to have a battle.net account and to sign in to the game with this account's email and password. When setting up the account, mostly for payment purposes, users are required to include the name that matches their credit card. However, real names are not visible to other gamers and the process is removed from the actual WoW gaming experience.

⁵ Facebook recently (March, 2014) changed user profiles' gender settings to allow a user to be "female," "male," or "custom." When "custom" is selected, users can choose from approximately 50 different labels. Here, the user can also choose if she wants herself to be represented by the pronoun "she," "he," or "they." If "they," the neutral pronoun is chosen, the silhouette that appears is the same as the silhouette for "he." It is important to note that, as of the time this chapter was published, even though a custom gender can be selected once a user subscribes, when initially signing up for Facebook, the new user *must* select either "female" or "male."

Goals

The goal of most video games is to win. Winning perhaps means saving the princess, as with Super Mario Brothers. Thus, winning a video game means becoming the hero. Although winning in WoW initially means reaching the highest available level and becoming the hero of your “race,” more complex games, like WoW, also have what is called *end game*. This means that play is effectively infinite—winning does not have to be defined through one, terminal goal.

Gamers can reach the currently available highest level, but continue to play the game. They can try for even crazier gear, continue to complete achievements, and generally keep up with their reached status. For example, if a gamer is the highest level, but a new piece of gear is introduced, fighting for that new sword or helm becomes more important than simply remaining stagnant as the highest available level. Further, the game keeps its subscribers engaged by introducing new worlds, quests, achievements, and highest possible levels every few years. It is as if becoming the “hero” is an ever-moving target, making it so that reaching hero status is not as hard as maintaining the reputation.

If the goal of a video game is to become the hero, then what is the Facebook analog? Many scholars argue that our current-day, post-Enlightenment heroes are celebrities, labeling them as our new Gods. As Ellis Cashmore, in his book, *Celebrity/Culture*⁶, explains, we obsess over celebrities, spending precious time and money to think about them, read about them, and browse pictures of them. But, even more so, we *simulate* celebrities, aspiring toward the attention, objects, and money they acquire.

Although being famous was originally a relatively objective trait, defined through deserved respect or merit for tangibly measured talent or accomplishments, current-day fame is a simulacrum⁷—it has little to no connection to reality, and no connection to any criteria beyond its own tautological parameters. The specific variety of celebrity to which I am referring, and the type which epitomizes our celebrity-culture, is the group of stars that are famous because they are good at being famous, the Kim Kardashians and Paris Hiltons. Without any traditional talent, these celebrities have crafted and mastered “the celebrity equation.” Wear the right clothes, hang out with the right people, perhaps throw in a scandal like a “leaked” sex tape, and the product is current-day celebrity.

Gaining fans is integral to this hyperreal process. A celebrity in the contemporary definition can only be relevant when she is talked about. She needs to have people notice her so that she can build a fan base that will make her money through the purchasing of products that she endorses, watching shows in which she stars, and going to events at which she makes appearances. Thus, it is important for modern-day celebrities to first reach a certain status, and to then continue maintaining this status, altering their methods as social expectations shift.

The process tends to be an elusive one, which makes it unlikely for all but a select few to reach this type of fame. However, the very nature of a site like Facebook outlines the process for laypeople. Users create digital, broadcastable identities through crafting narratives, uploading

⁶ Cashmore, E. (2006). *Celebrity/culture*. New York, NY: Routledge.

⁷ As discussed in Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981).

pictures, and gaining fans—friends and followers. Once the fan base size is acceptable, users work toward other goals, such as gaining likes, comments, and shares⁸.

Therefore, I argue that the goal of a site like Facebook is to reach some type of “celebrity status.” I want to make it clear that this is not some conscious goal of the user. Alice Marwick, for example, explores micro-celebrities and how people are using social media to their advantage to propel both their careers and social lives, such as fashion bloggers or web developers⁹. She is correct; they are celebrities in their own right, taking it upon themselves to exude qualities similar to that of prosperous corporations such as honesty, transparency, and authenticity.

But this active process is not the default setting for the majority of social media users. Instead, what I am attempting to illuminate is that the moment users sign up for and use Facebook, they are participating in the celebrity equation simply because the structure of the site *is* the celebrity model. Using the site *necessarily* means the user becomes her own paparazza, shooting pictures of herself and writing personal—often mundane—narratives that are awaiting likes, shares, and comments for further identity validation.

Like end game in video games, Facebook users are expected to constantly update their Facebook profiles, keeping up with both Facebook’s interface changes and shifts in social and cultural expectations. While maintaining hero status in WoW is ever-changing, so is maintaining some “celebrity” status on Facebook. As in WoW, this may include obtaining and showing off newly acquired “gear,” such as clothing, electronics, or cars. Like celebrities, we associate ourselves with brands, using geo-location software and uploaded pictures to let our friends know that we are hanging out at Starbucks or shopping on 5th Avenue. These “achievements” place us in specific social positions, much like WoW quests place gamers in precise moments in the game’s narrative.

WHY IT MATTERS

Now that I have, hopefully, convinced you that social media provide video-game-like experiences, I want to explore how this analogy can be useful. Specifically, this section will discuss two main areas of study that I believe are not given enough attention: the affordances presented to us in social media spaces and social media’s ability to blindly immerse us in its structure, norms, and expectations.

Affordances

Gibson¹⁰ explores how environments offer their inhabitants certain affordances. In other words, animals can only work with what the environment has provided them. His theory of affordances can be applied to man-made environments as well. For example, depending on the shape of a door handle, I will open a door in a certain manner. If an overpass is too low, only

⁸ For example, in my time speaking with college students, I have learned that obtaining about one thousand friends is acceptable and means that emerging adult users can move on to worrying about collecting likes and comments on pictures and status updates.

⁹ Marwick, A. (2013). *Status update: Celebrity, publicity, and branding in the social media age*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

¹⁰ Gibson, J.J. (1979). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

certain vehicles will be afforded the ability to pass under it¹¹. Thus, affordances define the relationship that an actor will have with her environment.

In video games, affordances do just this—they define how the gamers must play the game. For example, in Tetris, the gamer is afforded the ability to rotate the shapes and to move them from left to right. She is not, however, afforded the ability to choose which shape will fall when. In Super Mario Brothers, the gamer is afforded the ability to run on the x-axis and jump on the y-axis. However, she cannot make Mario move on the z-axis.

As a more intricate example, in WoW, gamers can only play as the avatar races and classes that are provided to them at setup. Players can also make decisions as to what types of affordances they will be granted in the game. For instance, if a gamer decides to train up skinning, she will then be granted the possibility of skinning certain foes after she has killed them. This further defines her game play because she can trade or sell these skins for other product or gold, or she can also train her tailoring skills and fashion her collected pelts into gear.

To summarize, gamers must *think* in the terms presented to them through the game interface and rules of play. Sometimes the provided affordances can present problems to gamers. Perhaps they are frustrated with some constraint or wish that the game allowed a certain ability. Often, gamers install guides and add-ons that give them some flexibility within the digital world that the game itself does not offer. For the most part, however, the limited affordances are understood as a necessary, and even obvious, aspect of games. What you are allowed to do and what you are not allowed to do, what your avatar looks like and what the virtual world she travels through looks like, is what makes each game unique. It is generally understood that the coding and development of a game cannot be infinite, and thus allows for a finite set of affordances.

Like video gamers, social media users are also only presented with certain affordances while working within the digital world. We are not so much creating our digital identities, as *customizing* templates that are provided to us¹². While users may feel as though they own this space, just as Blizzard owns a gamer's created WoW avatar, sites such as Facebook own each user's profile page. Online affordances in social media spaces present "distinct affordances" that play a more direct role in shaping how we perform identity¹³.

Twitter users, for example, must find ways to fit their thoughts into only 140 characters. Instagram users must decide how they will portray their photographable moment through one picture. Users in many of these media can use mentions (@) or hashtags (#) to further add meaning to their posts, but these are all affordances that some networking sites allow to function.

Facebook allows users to fill in the template provided, but not to change the actual code structure of the site¹⁴. Because of the celebrity culture embedded in the site, Facebook provides an identity outline for users to complete. The site guides users through a very specific identity

¹¹ An example discussed in Winner, L. (1980). Do artifacts have politics? *Daedalus*, 109(1), 121-136. This is one of his many brilliant examples in that it shows the ways in which man-made-objects have inherent politics. Although I do not thoroughly discuss them in this chapter, thinking of the affordances presented to us in both social media and video games can also allow us to uncover the racialized, classed, and gendered implications.

¹² Marwick, A. (2013). Online identity. In *A companion to new media dynamics* (J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns, Eds.) Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell. 355-364

¹³ boyd, d. (2011). "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications." In *A Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites* (Z. Papacharissi, Ed.). New York, NY: Routledge. 39-58. Quote from page 39.

¹⁴ This is contrary to a site like MySpace that, through an open code structure, allowed users to design their own profiles by changing backgrounds, color schemes, fonts, etc.

process, suggesting that users upload a profile picture that represents their physical self, post status updates, and interact with friends. Facebook provides its users with a profile page that begs to be filled in with information such as relationship status, favorite music, and hometown. Additionally, because Facebook collapses all of a user's social contexts into one, limited space, she must perform a more shallow identity that only skims the surface of her diverse selves.

Just as fans of Justin Bieber only want to hear about his current relationship status or lovers of Beyoncé want to know at what stores the singer shops, sites like Facebook are programmed to only prioritize these shallow notions of the self. They do this for two reasons. The first is due to the aforementioned context collapse. For most users, so many different social contexts (friends, family, co-workers, etc.) are represented in each user's friend network that any one identity performance could ostracize or offend the audience of another identity¹⁵. Second, Facebook wants users to create a monolithic self so that the site's algorithms can generate the optimal method of marketing to each user.

Therefore, as gamers must do in video games, users must think and perform within the confines of what each social networking site provides. While the expectation for affordances on social networking sites is that they are similar, if not equal to, those of the offline world, this is not often the case. The creators of social media make deliberate choices when they are deciding how to collect and display users' personal information.

Here is where the comparison between video gaming affordances and social media affordances diverges. Gamers understand that there are only certain affordances offered to them simply because it is what the game allows. Just as many in-game affordances are recognized as fantastic and unrealistic, they are also acknowledged as finite. Social media on the other hand, are often seen as replacements for offline social interaction. But, this is far from the truth.

Instead of viewing social media as media, we need to begin to view them as mediators¹⁶. Like windows, social media allow us to view realities through them. But, perhaps we spend too much time looking through these windows and not enough time contemplating the windows themselves. Depending on the composition of each window, the realities that we see through them can be drastically different. Thus, if we think of a site like Facebook as a window, we can see that, depending on how Facebook is programmed and designed, our own views of ourselves and of others are altered. Social media may seem to work autonomously, without any moral subjectivity, but in reality there are multiple owners, designers, and programmers behind the scenes who are making specific choices regarding which pieces of our information are collected, how our identities are broadcast, and what affordances we as users are granted during the process.

SUSPEND DISBELIEF AND IMMERSE YOURSELF

Any good book or movie asks its audience to become immersed in the crafted narrative. Someone reading a novel may feel connected to the protagonist's tribulations. A scary movie may seem so real that when the killer knocks on the door, the viewer quickly looks at her own door. Forgetting that there is a medium between you and a mediated experience is integral to enjoying the content. In this moment, as the consumer, you are suspending your disbelief. In

¹⁵ This is loosely referring to Goffman and the identity stages and audiences he discusses in *The presentation of self in everyday life*. (1959).

¹⁶ Galloway, A. R. (2013). *The interface effect*. Malden, MA: Polity

other words, you believe whatever it is the medium is asking you to believe, while at the same time forgetting to think about the medium that exists between you and the content.

Becoming immersed is an important part of playing video games. Gamers must suspend their disbelief to truly enjoy the game world. If WoW gamers constantly thought of how unrealistic the Orcs and Elves are in the game¹⁷, they would never get far enough past their disbelief to actually play the game. Instead, they believe in what the game is presenting, immersing themselves in the narratives and strategies¹⁸.

Although suspension of disbelief is a frequently discussed and obvious aspect of gaming, using social media is not often associated with suspending disbelief. However, I argue that this is a detrimental oversight. Social media users become immersed in the culture that social media sites promote and are constantly suspending their disbelief. For example, upon sign up, users believe that the site will represent them accurately to their social networks. Likewise, users believe that the site is accurately representing those that constitute their friend networks.

We can see a negative consequence of blind suspension of disbelief in the movie *Catfish*. The main character Nev falls in love with a girl who he meets on Facebook. He believes her to be someone who she ends up not being. In fact, Megan Faccio does not exist at all. Yet, Nev buys into the site's structure and immerses himself into the world that presented Megan as real. Eventually, as details become more and more convoluted, Nev decides to travel to Michigan and find out who Megan actually is.

Perhaps this is an extreme example, especially considering that often Facebookers link with friends that they have already met offline or through another medium¹⁹. However, subtler versions of this dilemma happen regularly. Facebook users buy into the site as a way to "authentically" define the self. The template that Facebook provides *becomes our identity guideline*; it is the guiding light for identity performances²⁰. And, as we see in *Catfish* when Nev travels to meet Megan, certain expectations *transcend the medium itself* and enter offline spaces. Therefore, instead of our offline, much more boundless options and expectations transferring online, the presented, confining spaces of online identity production leak into offline spaces.

It is as if the map has become the territory²¹. At first, social media were created to simply represent people as digital maps. Just as any normal map, the site was not able to be as intricate as the users themselves, just crass simulations created to make new interactions possible. In fact, early social media users implemented this attribute to their advantage, playing with and exploring different aspects of their identities in the often anonymous spaces²². But, users have now become so immersed in the social media world, that their expectations are that of which the map, or the site, is capable of affording, and not that of which the offline world, or the territory, is capable. In other words, a shallow depiction of self is becoming the norm.

In addition, using the site has become almost inextricably tied to daily routine. Users admit to automatically signing into sites like Facebook as soon as they sit down at a computer.

¹⁷ Or how similar the game's characters and worlds are to J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*

¹⁸ Ideas like these are discussed in Adams, S. S. (2009). What games have to offer: Information behavior and meaning-making in virtual play spaces. *Library Trends*, 57(4), 676-693.

¹⁹ boyd, d. m., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13(1), 210-230. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x

²⁰ Papacharissi, Z. (2009). The virtual geographies of social networks: A comparative analysis of Facebook, LinkedIn and ASmallWorld. *New Media & Society*, 11(1-2), 199-220. doi:10.1177/1461444808099577

²¹ Baudrillard, J. (1994). *Simulacra and simulation*. (S. F. Glaser, Trans.). Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press. (Original work published 1981).

²² Turkle, S. (1995). *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Moreover, with integrated apps, most users are really logged in to social media around-the-clock. Users receive Twitter and Instagram updates on a rolling basis. Facebook's messaging apps allow Facebook friends to communicate in a texting-like fashion at any time of day.

This immersion also transcends the apps and sites themselves. Users think about their Facebook images, for instance, continuously. I have had many discussions with Facebookers who have described instances when, if they are going to a party where they know pictures will be taken, they are sure to make themselves look "presentable," knowing that those photos will most likely be uploaded to social media. This is especially the case if they feel their profile picture is getting a bit stale—the social gathering is a chance to collect new profile picture options.

Becoming immersed in the social-media-created worlds really means that the languages and expectations of these cultures are seeping into our offline culture as well. Because social media are so often seen as simple gateways to offline interaction, this immersion is not taken as seriously as it should be. Instead, we should understand that online interactions are not the same as offline interactions. Just as guiding my Night Elf Hunter through the WoW world of Azeroth is not the same as when I walk through the city to grab a bite to eat, guiding our digital selves through the Facebook world is not the same as socializing at a party.

LOG OUT?

Gamers are aware that their immersive worlds are fantastic. They know that the affordances presented are simply a product of the game itself, not some real life analog. Gamers can both literally and figuratively "log off" of their respective games. They can differentiate between the online worlds and the offline world. The question that arises here, however, is if social media users can do the same thing. Are social media users aware that social networking sites represent worlds that are far from equivalent to offline worlds? Do they ever literally log out? Do they ever stop thinking about their digital presentations, or figuratively "log out?"

These are all questions whose answers will certainly vary depending on the social media users about whom we are speaking. But, what is important to note is that social media are much more similar to video games than perhaps we had originally thought. The majority of the social media spaces available offer us distinct affordances that define our actions and ask us to suspend any hesitations we may have, immersing ourselves into their created worlds. Much like video gamers, social media users *play* the social media game, abiding by the created rules and transforming their performances to fit that required by the digital social spaces.