

## The King of *Quake* – is there an avatar in MMOFPS?

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One clear argument in presuming identity relation between the player and his avatar is observed in addressing the avatar as "me", as indicated in e. g. Kimpa, Muukonen (2007:2). For example, when player's avatar dies, the player will say "I died". This is true for many games, including *Quake Live*. So, it seems natural to presume identity relation in that game, too. In this article, we will try to show that this identity relation is just an illusion. We will examine three basic aspects of the character – his history, appearance and development in both *Quake Live* and other games, mainly *World of Warcraft (WoW)*. By close comparison of various features in those games, we will try to show that characters in MMORPG's like *WoW* do, while characters in MMOFPS games like *Quake Live* do not represent the player in any way. From a definition of an avatar it would follow that the characters in MMOFPS games are not avatars i. e. that "avatar" is a negative existential in the domain of these games. After that, we will notion that in some aspects, we could possibly speak of characters in MMOFPS games as of tools or even as a player himself. Finally, we will briefly look in what way *Quake Live* is an eSport.

A player's character can be defined as a model used in computer games that is controlled or controllable by a player. A player's avatar refers to an object which represents him in gamespace. In our effort to distinguish these two in our paper, we will define an avatar as a character that represents the player.

Objects of our study will be games *Quake Live* and *WoW* but we expect that at least some of the conclusions will be applicable to the genres of these games in general, namely the Massively multiplayer online first person shooter games (MMOFPS games) and Massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs). MMO games are games which support a lot of players playing simultaneously on the Internet. FPS games are sub-genre of the so-called "shooters" genre. As indicated in the name, in these kind of game, player's character's objective is to shoot at different objects. In FPS games the focus is on the first person perspective. Like noted by Elias (2009: 9) that means the player observes all the action as if he is looking through his character's eyes. In RPG games a player plays accordingly to his character's role or, to put it bluntly, he is taking the role of the character.

### 1. Character history

Character history is often regarded as an important part of characters in most games. This is particularly evident in RPGs where the story of the character directs the way that character is played. A basic element of character history is his race and/or class from which his skills and/or abilities are derived. That means each race will have different traits and while not imperative it is advisable to play to your races strengths and to specialise the character in areas that benefit you. For example, the Orc race in *WoW* has *Axe Specialization* trait which increases expertise with axes. So, if you play an Orc you will do best if you use an axe and not a sword. Racial traits also introduce restrictions – if you choose the above mentioned Orc race, you cannot play the Paladin class. So, it is justified to say that racial traits directly influence gameplay. In RPGs, when choosing a character with regards to his history, player can be directed by many things. In *WoW* choosing a character became a science of its own

kind, judging by the enormous amount of various guides that can be found on the Internet. The most frequent tip is: the player should choose the character that he will enjoy playing and that is more like him. It is often suggested to create several different characters and play them for a while to find out which one suits you the most. Or, as noted by Bear (2010), the one that best represent that part of your identity you want to project. For example, if you do not like to fight and would be more satisfied with helping others, you should choose a class whose role is to heal and not to deal damage. After all, the advertising slogan for *WoW* asks you "What is your game?" Considering the above, it is justified to say that the character chosen represents the player.

While the characteristics described above may be found in some FPS games e. g. *Team Fortress 2*, in typical FPS games it is quite the opposite. In *Quake Live* character history is reduced to a one- or two-sentence flavour text in which race is mentioned as a side note. Although character history and race are present, nor skills nor abilities are derived from them. As a consequence, all characters are exactly the same when it comes to traits – they simply do not have them. In contrast to RPGs, race in *Quake Live* is not a game mechanic and as such does not alter gameplay. There is nothing in character history that directs the way that character is played. Due to the mention properties of *Quake Live* characters, the character selection process is much simpler. That is, since the characters have no associated traits that emerge from specific race it is impossible for a player to choose a character that is more like him psychologically. Also, there is no "variety of archetypes", as termed by Adams (n. d.) through which a player can explore his own identity. So, with regards to his "history", the character in *Quake Live* cannot represent the player in any way.

## 2. Character appearance

RPGs typically offer a wide range of possible character appearances. Some of the elements of character appearance are determined by character's race. For example, dwarves are usually short and stout while elves are tall and lean. However, within certain preset racial parameters RPGs still allow a great degree of freedom in customising the appearance of the character. In that way in *WoW* a player can change his character's physical features such as gender, skin colour, hair style and even his face. Players can use various character customisation options as means of expressing their own identity. A basic example would be a player selecting clothes only in his favourite colour. Customisation is closely related to the feeling the player will have in playing his character. King and Krzywinska (2006: 215) for example, suggest that different features "may have an impact on the degree to which a player feels comfortable playing in that skin" i. e. playing his character. Due to advanced facial features customisation options like the one present in *Star Trek Online*, the player can even design a face that closely resembles his own. Players usually spend a lot of time customising the character, especially in MMO games, because the character represents them to the other players in game. Items such as armour and weapons also change the appearance of the character and their quality often indicates player's experience with the game. In this way, some other player does not even need to look at his potential opponent's level indicator to know what he can expect in the battle. So, with regards to his appearance, the character can represent the player in two ways: 1. he can indicate player's physical and sometimes psychological characteristics or preferences and 2. he can indicate player's mastery of the game.

In *Quake Live*, the player can choose among 33 predefined characters and there are no customisation options. Therefore, the chances that his character will represent some of his physical characteristics are pretty low. Unless he is a biotechnologically crossbreed mutant or

similar. Even if the character selection is based on aesthetic preference of the player, the preference is not indicated by character's appearance most of the time. It is due to a game option called force model which forces the game to display all opponents as if they are using the same character model of the player's choosing. That means if the player's opponents use force model too, they may not perceive his character as well. For example, although you choose character that looks like a big eye, others will probably see you as a green humanoid battle machine called Keel, which is the most popular forced character. Like in RPGs items/weapons change the appearance of the character. Difference is that in *Quake Live* items are the same for all players and they have no special quality which could indicate player's mastery of the game. I. e. some other player cannot assume player's experience with the game by simply observing his character appearance. So, with regards to his appearance, the character cannot represent the player in the ways he does in RPGs.

### 3. Character development

Through the mechanic of experience levels the character gains expertise as RPG progresses. With each level gained, the character receives new skills or upgrades existing ones. Through the course of the game, characters can also unlock certain achievements which can award them bonuses to various skills. Essentially, the character becomes more powerful in all categories. For a mage that might mean more powerful spells while a warrior might deal more damage with each strike. By gaining levels, characters also gain access to better equipment as items usually have, in addition to possible racial restrictions, a minimum level requirement. For example, to wield the Goblin Smasher item in *WoW*, your character has to be the Tauren or Goblin race and be at least 12<sup>th</sup> level. Naturally, parallel to character's skills increase, the player skills grow as well. This is due to time spent on playing. Therefore, it is justified to say that character's level represents player's skills and experience with the game.

*Quake Live* characters are unable to gain levels. As there are no levels and no traits, all of the game items are immediately available for use by any character. The items also have the exact same effect regardless of the character using them and regardless of the character they are being used upon. For example, the Railgun weapon will always do 80 damage points upon a successful hit. Achievements awarded in *Quake Live* do not have game altering consequences i. e. they do not provide bonuses to the character. Considering the above, the character cannot *prima facie* tell us whether the player controlling that character has played for only one hour so far or has he played thousands. One argument which clearly shows discrepancy between player's and character's skills lies in a following hypothetical situation. Consider for example a possible but not legal situation in which some inexperienced player buys the account of an advanced player, with a high level character in *WoW*. If the inexperienced player knows basic concepts of the game i. e. is familiar with the rules, he would still play well although he is a new player, popularly called "noob". In *Quake Live*, buying the account of an advanced player would bring you nowhere since in that game, the player is the one who learns and whose skills are improved by playing, and no skills reside with the character. For example, if an advanced player knows how to perform so-called Bridge to rail jump and you buy his account, you will still have to learn to do that kind of jump by yourself. Therefore, we cannot say that the character represents player's skills and experience with the game.

One important argument emerges from all three observed aspects i. e. character history, appearance and development. In *WoW*, numerous and advanced customisation options, different levels and skills and numerous equipment items made possible for the

player's character to be unique in gamespace. For it is nearly impossible to find two identical characters. On the other hand, in *Quake Live*, lack of customisation options, levels and skills, and the fact that the items are the same for all players, results in very high possibility that two or even more players will have exactly the same character. Their characters are in no way unique as players themselves are. Therefore, it would be quite strange to assume identity relation between players and their characters in *Quake Live*.

With regards to observed aspects, in MMORPGs characters can and often do represent the player and therefore it is justified to say that they are avatars. In contrast, characters in MMOFPS games do not represent the player in any way and therefore we cannot say that they are avatars. I. e. the avatar is a non-referring expression in the domain of MMOFPS. Therefore, sentences which quantify over avatars in MMOFPS are either false, as showed by Russell (1905) or absurd, as showed by Strawson (1950). Consider for example, the sentence "Goonie's avatar in *Quake Live* looks much like her" in which "Goonie" is a nickname of some imaginary player. Both Russell and Strawson would agree on three truth conditions which must be met in order for the mentioned sentence to be true: 1. There is an x in *Quake Live* which is the Goonie's avatar; 2. There is no more than one x in *Quake Live* which is the Goonie's avatar; 3. If x is the Goonie's avatar in *Quake Live*, than x looks much like her. Russell would say that we are asserting the existence of Goonie's avatar in the above sentence and since Goonie's avatar do not exist (as we tried to show throughout the paper), the sentence is false. On the other hand, Strawson would say that the existence of Goonie's avatar is implied but not asserted. That means that the existence of Goonie's avatar is a condition which must be met before the particular use of above sentence can be assigned a truth value. Since the condition is not met, the use is absurd.

But if characters in MMOFPS are not avatars, it would be natural to ask what are they? One possible answer is that characters in MMOFPS are merely a tool by which the goal of the game is achieved, like e. g. chess figures in a game of chess. This can be justified by noticing that the character in *Quake Live* cannot do anything without the input of a player. There are no so-called macros which auto activate in certain conditions and are present in some other games (they were present in *WoW* until recently). For example, if character's hitpoints drop below certain value, macro enables that character to use healing spell automatically. If character's hitpoints in *Quake Live* drop below certain value, there is no way to automatically increase hitpoints. Without the input of a player, a character will simply stand in one position. He even does not have idle animation which is present in lot of games, including *WoW*. Other possible answer is that the character is a player himself. While this may seem farfetched in regard to current MMOFPS games, it makes sense if we look onto a possible evolution of FPS games. It seems that FPS games tend to evolve into the *Star Trek*-like holodeck program or similar. Also it seems like we are making first steps in placing the player in the game space directly. Today's technology cannot enable the player to enter the gamespace literally, but some technologies enable the player to literally try out virtual reality. For example, Elias (2009:10) writes about the so-called Head mounted display system which is a helmet with a build-in mini-screens and an attached dataglove which enables you to directly manipulate objects in cyberspace. In this case it seems justified to say that it is really you who catch the ball in the game, for example, because you are doing it directly. The technical nature of games like *Quake Live* is supportive to this and similar technology so it seems there is a possibility for enabling player to play directly too.

According to Wagner's (2007: 182) definition of sport, several key requirements that make a game into a sport are: 1. Intentional skill development; 2. Cultural field of activity, 3. Comparing skill and 4. Generally accepted rules

We will try to show that *Quake Live* satisfies all four requirements and therefore can be classified as an eSport. Requirement 1: The skills in a sport need to be developed actively and intentionally, that is the game needs to be repetitively practiced. Due to the properties of character, it is assured that all of the skills developed will be exclusively player's skills. Requirement 2: As noted by Wagner (2007: 182) himself we are living in an age of transformation from industrial to information society and video games become an increasingly integral part of our culture. Requirement 3: This requirement can also be interpreted as a competition requirement. The best way to compare skills is to compete. Skillless character provides a perfect vessel for skill comparison, as the skills compared are players' skills. Requirement 4: *Quake Live* has a set of generally accepted rules dictated by the game itself. From the requirements described above, it is quite obvious that the emphasis is put on the players and their skills which is exactly what our analysis of *Quake Live* points out.

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