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Title: Interviews within an experimental framework: A potential on how to make sense of sense-making in virtual worlds

Abstract:

This paper discusses the methodology of a study conducted to understand how novices make sense of virtual worlds as sources of entertainment, and how sense-making is related to their desire to engage further with those worlds. Sense-making is understood here to be the internal behaviors, both affective and cognitive, and external behaviors involved in seeking to understand one's self and the encompassing world. Engaging with a virtual world involves both interpretive interactivity – to make sense of the content -- and physical interactivity – to make sense of the technical interface to further the content. Thus, in order to understand sense-making of virtual worlds, a method to record the interpretive process, as well as the objectively recordable physical actions, is required. However, in order to understand the sense-making involved in specific instances of engaging with novel virtual worlds, an amount of control is required over the nature of those situations to ensure that they are unique experiences requiring some level of sense-making.

With these requirements, a hybrid study was designed involving both quantitative and qualitative methods. This mixed methods approach was derived from deconstructing empirical work into three components: data collecting frameworks, data collection methods, data analysis methods. An experiment provides the framework for collecting data, which can be done through quantitative methods, such as surveys and observations, or qualitative methods, such as interviews. This argument rests on the conceptualization of an experiment as a controlled introduction of a variable(s) into a system, and the measure of the response of that introduction on the system – only here, instead of only quantitative methods measuring that response, qualitative methods are employed to understand the mediating/moderating position of the individual's sense-making of the variable. The resulting study involved the following: a within-subjects experimental design served as the framework for the study, while in-depth qualitative interviews were employed alongside audio and video recording as the means of data collection; currently data analysis is likewise a mixture. Data collection occurred both during the situations of engaging with the media products, via talk aloud protocols, and afterwards when asked to

recall and compare these situations in open-ended questionnaires and interviews informed by Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology.

Having completed the study using this mixed methods approach, I can discuss this effectiveness, and where the approach requires more work. In terms of strengths, gathering interpretive experiences alongside recording their behaviors does produce a rich informative mixture: during situations, specific structures of media products can be seen relating to specific moments of sense-making; after the experiment, recollections went into more depth, bringing in other lived experiences in discussing the engagements with virtual worlds. In terms of weaknesses, they align with common criticisms of experiments: the artificiality of the experiences as not being part of the participants' actual lived experiences with the media, as well as carryover effects in terms of learning how to engage. In conclusion, the mixed methods approach was necessary given the research question and yields impressive data; however, future uses should consider randomizing the exposures to reduce carryover effect.