The Effect of Mode on Participant Responses to Qualitative Research in Virtual Worlds

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Outline

• Motivation/background

• Methods and results by stage of research

• Summary findings
Second Life residents taking the survey
Why explore virtual worlds for research purposes?

- Qualitative studies experiencing increasing difficulty recruiting participants
  - Focus groups
  - In-depth interviews
  - Cognitive interviews

- Cost of recruiting only can be hundreds of dollars per head for special populations
Advantages of Virtual World Situations for Qualitative Research

- Easy access to a large and diverse population of respondents (RTI, 2011)
- Surveys can be specifically designed to be avatar-administered or self-administered (Bell et al, 2009)
- Data can be collected quickly and cost-effectively (Bainbridge, 2007)
- Access to special populations
Methods – Research Design

• 3 stages:

  Initial survey in virtual world

  One week later, followup survey in real world

  Those who completed both asked to volunteer for in-depth qualitative interview
Methods – Research Questions

• Were there any mode effects?
• Was there any meaningful or important distinction between the real person and the avatar?
• Who answered: the avatar or the real person?
• Would SL provide adequate and cost-effective access to special populations?
Methods – virtual world survey

• Social Research Foundation/First Opinions Panel, $1 incentive (L$250)

• U.S. panelists, 18+, March 20 to April 2, 2012

• After removing duplicates, n of 192 (82% valid)
Second screen of the survey with selection marked
## Methods – real world survey

- **Response by stage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STAGE</th>
<th>RESPONSE (n)</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>192</td>
<td>82% valid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>70% of stage 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>44% of stage 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results – Mode Effects

• 5 identical survey items examined for mode effects

• Virtually no missing data (DK/REF)

• Mean of 4.12 matched items, median of 4, mode of 5
Results: Matching Items

• **Attitude/opinion items**
  - satisfaction with life in general (77%)
  - patriotism (83%)
  - rating of economic conditions (78%)

• **Factual items**
  - something stolen in past 5 years (85%)
  - political party affiliation (89%)
Methods – In-depth interviews

- Selected 10 volunteers
- Range of demographic characteristics
- Half-hour telephone interviews in April 2012
- $30 incentive
- A qualitative protocol was used
In-depth interview findings

- No mode effects

- All responses to the survey reflected the real life person, not the avatar

The avatar did not “have a mind of his/her own.”
In-depth interview findings (continued)

- Survey questions were answered with reference to real life
- SL residents varied greatly in ways they used SL.
- SL is an excellent venue to tap into special populations.
Who Is the Avatar?

• People very closely aligned with the avatar, the avatar reflects their personality.

• Opinion of the avatar is opinion of first-life person.

"The avatar is an animated personification of the individual -- and [the avatar] sees it that way." "The avatar is a character I play."
Who Answered the Survey Questions?

• Respondents reported the first-life person answered the SL survey. Questions pertained to first life, not SL.

“Those aren’t questions the avatar would know anything about!”
Summary Findings

• Avatar answers as the person
• No mode effects on survey responses
• SL potentially good venue for recruiting qualitative respondents
• Access to special populations
• Westat sees opportunities for continued exploratory research
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