Claiming One's Physical Resources for Action in VR

Position paper for the Social VR workshop at CHI'21

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1 INTRODUCTION

What I'm telling next is an unpleasant experience I had while studying social VR platforms with some colleagues. Please note the content warning above before you read it.

1.1 Harassment in VR and the frustration of not being able to push back

This unpleasant experience happened when I was studying different social VR environments with my colleagues at UC SC/Berkeley (CA; USA) [1]. Three of us would meet at a particular place in the VR environment after having spent some time with the onboarding experience that each platform provided. This particular incident happened in one of our first VR explorations. We were checking out AltSpaceVR and agreed to meet at a particular location at the campfire. As it was usual for us, we were connected via Skype to be able to talk to each other until we were "physically" together in VR and could talk within the VR world. That day, I think I was the last to jump to the campfire; my other two colleagues were already there. The usual fun challenge in this kind of situation was just meeting, being able to recognize each other and gather in a particular spot, to then explore that space together.

I "landed" in the campfire and I remember thinking how it all looked like a night carnival-in-the-woods party with lots of extravagant looking avatars, some gathered as a group, others just wandering around. My colleagues told me they were by a particular landmark. I remember looking towards that direction and seeing two robot avatars (the default avatar in AltSpaceVR) who I thought might be them. I started waving and hollering at them, which attracted their attention, as well as that of many others, who suddenly swarmed about. I remember I was surprised at what I thought at the time was a super social behavior. I remember those strangers trying to engage with me and my colleagues, which was a bit overwhelming because it did not really allow us to talk among ourselves and do our business. They would also come too close to us, stepping into our personal space, which at the time I interpreted was unintended and one of those flaws in VR at the time. That made me not be able to understand what was going on in my personal space, which made me a bit uncomfortable. Instead, I could better understand and interpret what was going on with those strangers and my colleagues. Suddenly, I saw how one of those strangers, who was carrying a giant blade, stood behind one of my

colleagues and passed the blade in front of my colleague's neck. It was very disturbing. I told my colleague, who didn't realize that was going on. I understood why immediately soon after. That stranger with a blade come towards me and I lost their sight. Next thing I was an object overlaid and across what I felt my holographic body. Besides the pretend "killing" to which we were subject, I also experience sexual harassment. The offender's approach was different this time. They would come towards me with a big phallic item – I remember e.g. a big pencil – which they would hold towards me, and they would just pierce through me. I remember all we could do at the time, was narrating what was going on to each other, as if they were not there seeing it. What was more unsettling to me was that the fact that my virtual body felt "so mine" but at the same time didn't work like mine. I could not push back. I would have loved to push all those strangers back. A colleague told me to block my offenders, but it was impossible. It involved several steps, including ray pointing at them, but as soon as I did that, they would step back and another stranger would intercept the ray. My colleagues and I managed to coordinate action and we managed to block some, but there were too many. We decided to step out of VR and chat via Skype. We discussed how "well organized" those offenders were, how well they knew and avoided the mechanisms to block them, and how helpless we felt not being able to help each other.

I also remember feeling silly and a bit embarrassed about not understanding what they were doing to me, about misreading their engagement as social – this was most upsetting to me because in my work, I design for and analyze pro-social behavior and I take myself as somebody who can easily read and act upon social cues. Thinking about this afterwards I wondered why I didn't just remove my headset and just talk to my colleagues via Skype. For some reason, I didn't even think of that option. But probably that would not have worked well. The vision of leaving my virtual body there in that situation was quite unpleasant as well.

2 THIS WORKSHOP

Quite some time has passed from this experience, and I still think about how real everything felt and how little of my resources for action I could resort to at the time. Since then, I have worked in different projects involving VR (e.g. [2]), in particular engaging in embodied design ideation in VR and in Mixed Reality (MR) to design prosocial VR and MR experiences. In all, facilitating designers, players, and participants to use their usual physical and social ways of being have been at the core. I think this is very aligned with the topics in this workshop, which is why I would love to participate. In particular, I'm interested in the topics of particular personal space, and social cues, and virtual collaboration around designing embodied experiences in and through VR.

REFERENCES

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