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

Sarah Dipko
Catherine Billington
Pat Dean Brick
Westat

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)
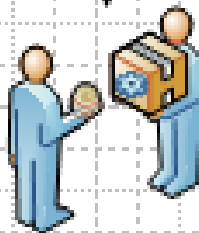
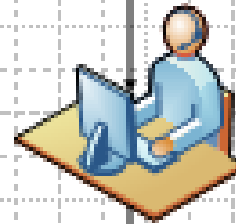- Access to special populations

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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
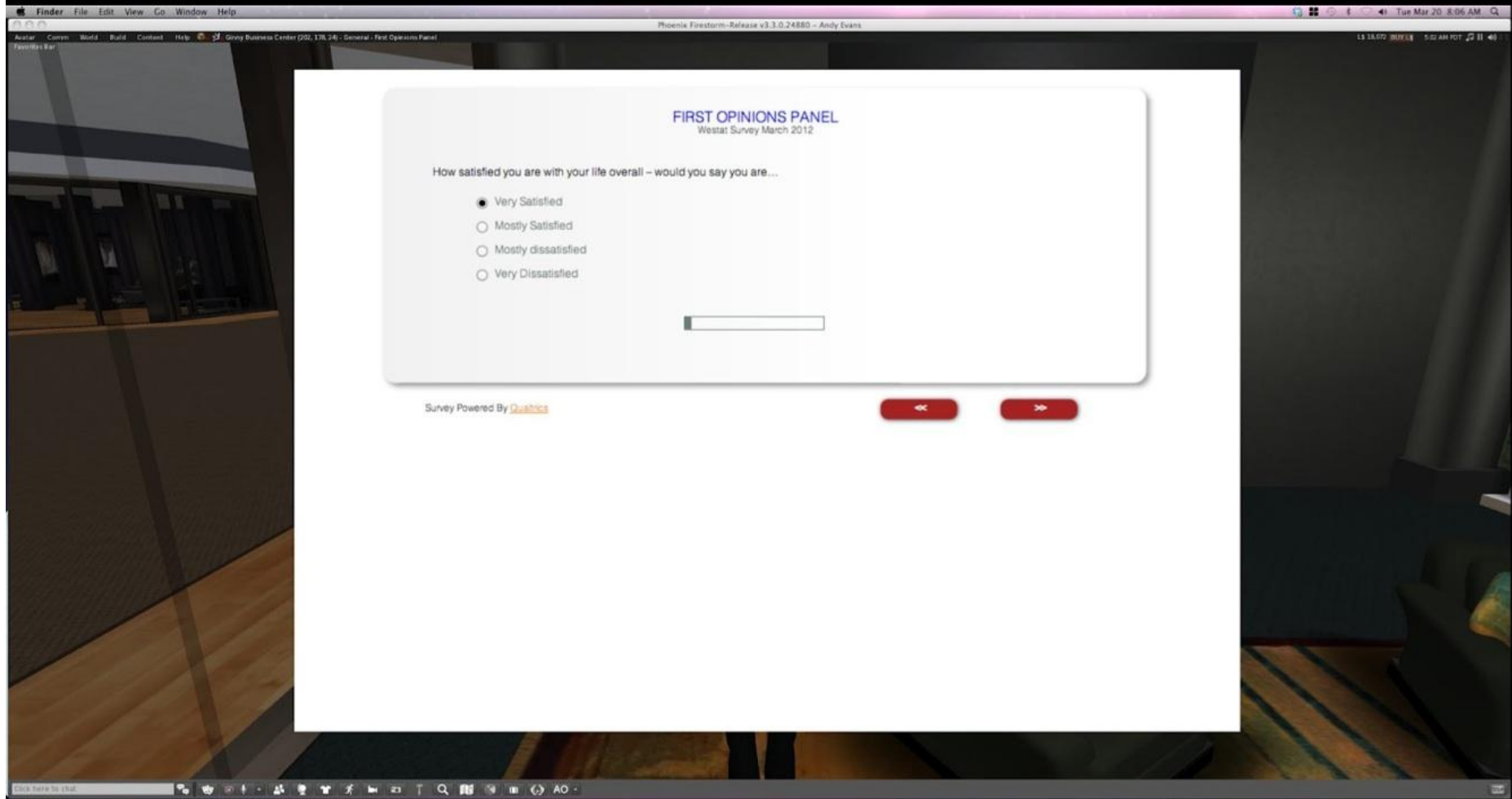
Methods – real world survey

- Response by stage

STAGE	RESPONSE (n)	%
1	192	82% valid
2	135	70% of stage 1
3	59	44% of stage 2

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

Contact Information

- Authors: Sarah Dipko

  SarahDipko@westat.com

- Social Research Foundation – First Opinions Panel

  Andrew Mallon, Executive Director

  Social Research Foundation | New York

  718-793-9400 Phone & FAX

  andy@socialresearchfoundation.org

  www.socialresearchfoundation.org