

Pixels, Parts & Pieces:
Constructing Digital Identity

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ABSTRACT

Pixels, Parts & Pieces: Constructing Digital Identity

Kelly Boudreau

How do patterns of digital gameplay influence the functional and social roles, personal identity, and the relationship between a player and their avatar?

From Turkle to today, existing theories of online identity seem to suggest that these identities are fragmented bits of the self, cycled through and discarded with ease. In Game Studies, focus has often been on the creation of the digital persona and its representation, the avatar. Through auto-ethnographic research and informed by the literature culled from Game Studies, Sociology (Symbolic Interactionism, Structural Functionalism) and Social Psychology, I explicate the way actions, tasks and goals create interwoven patterns of play that structure multi-layered digital identities within social and functional roles of the game. Within the construct of character creation, gameplay, and role identities, relationships between the player, avatar, physical environment and other players develop and redefine perceptions and meanings, which shape and harmonize identities.

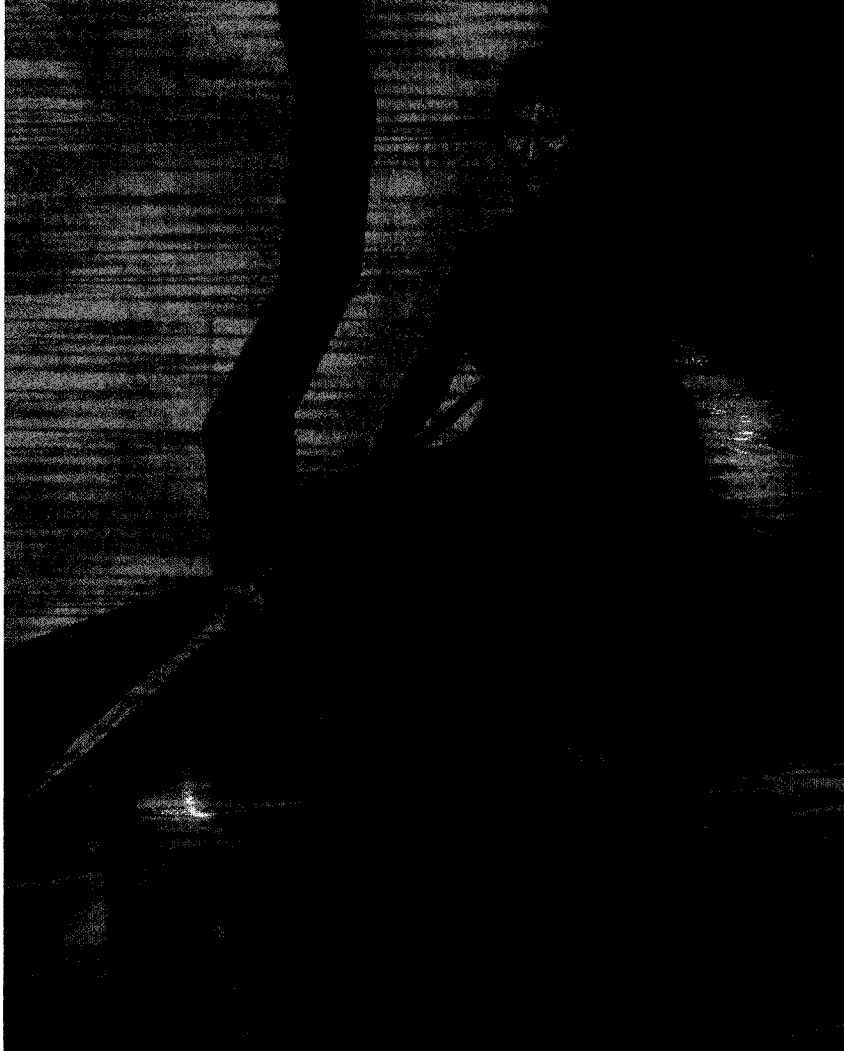
Far from being fixed internally in the player, these identities are interwoven through internal and external interactions, creating perceptions and performances of play that emerge as complex negotiated selves, interacting between spaces in the self and the social.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my partner, Alen and my children Nerrissa and Kiana for being so supportive and patient with me over the last few months; I love you. Thank you to Shanly Dixon for all the support, advice and editing that I could not have done without. To Tamara Paradis for taking the time to look over these pages and guide my grammar. And to Dr. Bart Simon, who has always supported my ideas.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Velixious LyDelicious – for without her, there would be no questions.



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“Identities meet and interact when people meet and interact”

P.J. Burke

Introduction

I have been playing video games almost all of my life. I began as a child; from challenging my brother to a game of Pong on our visits to our grandmother's to our first Atari and Intellivision consoles that brought us space games, turn-based combat games and digital versions of the classic table top game Dungeons and Dragons. As the years passed by, so did the development of video games in terms of the graphics, the degree of difficulty, and the time required for completion.

For as long as I can remember, video games have always been part of my identity, as well as my family's. Throughout the two and a half generations of video games that have passed through my life, none have had such a lasting impression on me as the massively multi-player online game (MMOG) of EverQuest, introduced in March 1999. Through the login pages of EverQuest on the internet, the video gameplay experience that I had understood over the course of my life was forever altered. Although defined as a game due to its structured, goal oriented play, for many, EverQuest is also a rich social world based loosely on Tolkien-esque landscapes and Dungeon & Dragons battle scenarios that go far beyond the simple idea of a game.

EverQuest, and other similar massively multi-player online games, requires players to invest many hours playing the game in order to progress, although there is no 'real' ending to the game. The game design also obligates players to rely on other real live players. Through this unique game model, massively multi-player online games have the ability to become more than just a simple past time. For many, MMOGs offer a

unique game space where play is taken to a new level, creating social spaces for some and extreme competitive spaces for others (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman; forthcoming 2007). Whether social or competitive, the commitment and obligation required to progress in the game impacts a player's identity. The research questions that drive this thesis, as well as the overall body of my academic work stem from my personal experiences of over five years of playing massively multi-player online games intensively with my partner. Through these personal, social experiences, I noticed that the way we interact within the game space did not completely coincide with the way we interacted in our everyday, physical lives. While we normally think of social interaction as an interaction between two people – in a sort of 'give and take' exchange, I found myself grappling with the complexity of interactions within the game space that seemed to go beyond simply me as a player interacting with other people playing the same game. I began to think about what made this digital game world different than our everyday, physical world and what elements remained the same? How was my identity as an individual (re)constructed through my gameplay both inside and outside of the game space? What role did my avatar and the relationship I had with her play in this process of identity construction? With these questions in mind, my research objective was to understand the process of identity construction and maintenance in goal oriented, digital environments. Specifically, this thesis will examine identity in the massively multi-player online game of EverQuest based on my own play experience between the years of 1999 and 2002, and formal participant observation sessions between the years of 2002 and 2005.

EverQuest is a 3-dimensional game world played over the internet. Players pay

for an account to connect to a game server hosted by the company that owns the game to play with other players in synchronous time. Each account can have up to 8 playable characters. Once logged in, players create their character which they will use each time they log into the game. The game is inherently social because many of the tasks and quests are designed to be completed by anywhere from two to over sixty playing characters.

With so many people playing together in the same digital space, social interaction is inevitable and often leads to the organic construction of a community within the game world in the form of groups, guilds, and alliances. Although a player can navigate the world alone and accumulate some level of success, in order for a playing character to advance in levels and power, they must cooperate with other players. The game is designed to be played in groups of up to six people for hunting and questing purposes. A guild, which is a membership only association, is composed of other players who share common game goals and ideologies – can have a minimum of ten people to an unlimited number of players. Most large scale battles require as many as sixty or even eighty playing characters to coordinate their efforts in order to win a battle. This requires high levels of organization and cooperation among players in order to succeed. Although EverQuest is a social and often collaborative game as described above, it is also a competitive one. Resources within the game are limited and so many players are often vying for the same rewards. Seeing that there can often be as many as 2,000 players online on one server at one time comprising of many guilds, it is understandable that political and social issues within the game world develop organically by the nature of human interaction.

In the world of MMOGs, the construction of identity is a complex process, involving not only an individual and a society, but also a mediating element that exists between the player and the game – the avatar. The avatar is a key component that differentiates identity in MMOGs from identity in the players' everyday, tangible world in that it is a representation of self that exists completely outside of the player. There is a lot of room within the game structure of MMOGs for a player to construct and maintain identity through the development of their avatar, the interactions they have with other players and their interactions with the game world. This identity 'work' happens on multiple levels with many different impacting elements from player to player interaction, group to group and guild to guild interaction as well as the player's direct interaction with the physical space of the game.

In an attempt to understand this process, I began to examine literature within various disciplines including Sociology of Community (Delanty, 2003; Howard, 2003; Wellman, 2002), Symbolic Interactionism (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), Identity Theory (Burke, 2003; Taylor, 2006 Thoughts, 2003; Turkle, 1995) and Structural Functionalism (Parsons, 1965; Turner, 1952) to answer to questions I had about how the game design affected social interaction, and what it meant in terms of identity formation. Although these works were seminal to my current understanding of the game environment from a sociological perspective, I was still left with many unanswered questions about the nature of digital community, digital identity and the process in which these things develop in the goal oriented environments of MMOGs.

Hoping to find the answers from a digital games research perspective, I was lead to works by many prolific authors on subjects such as Economics (Castronova, 2003),

Identity and Gender Issues (Cruikshank, 2001; Donath, 2001; Kolko, 1998; Stone, 1991) and Community in digital spaces (Feenberg & Barney, 2004; Rheingold, 1993; Ward, 1999). Although my review of this set of literature did not answer my questions specifically, it contributed to the theoretical foundation required to explore my questions surrounding identity in MMOGs and more broadly, in digital environments. While there is a growing body of literature dealing specifically with MMOG's as the primary object of study (Duchenaault, Yee, Nickel & Moore, 2006; Humphreys, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2004) the focus of this thesis is identity. It is my aim to form an understanding of the process of identity construction within the larger context of visual, goal oriented digital environments. I am using the MMOG EverQuest as the case study.

Many scholars have focused on what particular or specific preferences meant to the individual players; the importance of these choices in a psychological, social and cultural context and how the aesthetics of game design impacted the ideas and ideologies of the players (Frasca, 2001; Nakamura, 1995; Salen & Zimmerman, 2006; Wright, T., Boria, E. & Breidenbach, P., 2000). Most of this literature deals predominantly with the identity of the 'user' or player through the creation of one's avatar, or character that the player navigates through any particular game space.

I concur with the theory that the process of avatar creation is an important, if not the primary element when thinking about the construction and maintenance of identity in video games, but I believe that the process of identity creation in video games does not end at the character select screen. There are multiple, interconnected factors throughout the gameplay process that impacts identity, including the interaction a player has with their avatar, social interactions with other playing characters and the understanding of the

game space on behalf of the player. These elements factor into the process of identity construction and maintenance within massively multi-player online games, moving beyond the idea that identity is reducible to the actions of the player.

This project is important to the field of sociology because the study of identity has been a cornerstone of the discipline. As the contemporary western world becomes increasingly mediated through technology, such as cell phones, computers and the internet, it is important that we look at the new elements that impact identity. People are no longer faced only with their daily interactions that occur in 'physical space', but are now faced with interactions that are technologically mediated, in abstract spaces (Bauman, 2004). These contemporary forms of interaction introduce new complexities to the question of identity as representation and how it is constructed and maintained. This construction and maintenance process is altered as face to face interactions that defined traditional social identity wanes. Individuals are now confronted with different forms of their identity that goes beyond their physical selves. MMOGs are ideal digital spaces to begin the exploration of the complex process of identity construction and maintenance since they are designed as goal oriented socially dependent worlds.

Until this point, the model for understanding or exploring identity in virtual worlds has been borrowed directly from theories based in physical space offering two layers of identity that exist between self & other, centering on the player (or user) (Turkle, 1995). Although not specific to virtual interactions, Gary Alan Fines (1983) offers another layer to the process of identity formation within the context of role playing games; the identity of the person, of the player and of the character, but again, the individual remains at the center of the interaction. Salazer (2005) also describes the

player/avatar relationship as a form of 'cyborgic triad' involving the player, the avatar and the gamespace itself. Within the body of this thesis, I am proposing a different structural perspective that is not based on the concept of layering, or a triadic relationship, but on the idea that identity construction and maintenance is an ongoing process of networked interactions between distributed identities that includes the player, but does not end with the player.

Methodology

In order to understand the process of identity construction within the vast, abstract world of MMOGs, it was important to have multiple methods that, collectively, could demonstrate the process of identity construction from various perspectives (Taylor, 1999). These multiple perspectives are important in order to uncover the complexities of virtual identity since the process of identity construction and maintenance involves many interacting factors that go beyond the individual. For this reason, the foundation of this research has been driven by my personal experience, using an auto-ethnographic method (Denzin, 1989; Holts, 2003) combined with virtual ethnography (Green, 1999; Jacobson, 1999; Ward, 1999) digital participant observation (Paterson, B., Bottorff, J., & Hewat, R. 2003) and online interviews (Crighton & Kinash, 2003) with other MMOG players.

Following is a description of each research method that was used in gathering the data for this project. Some of the data is included in this thesis whereas other data influenced the direction of inquiry. Each method will be described briefly in terms of its technical elements. The details specific to this project will be outlined in order to give the reader an idea how the empirical data was collected.

Auto-ethnography

Auto-ethnography follows the tradition of auto-biographical writing, but with an analytical perspective familiar to the ethnographic method (Denzin, 1989). Within the autobiographical/auto-ethnographical perspective, Denzin explains the complexity of the position of the writer, stating that;

The self and its signifiers (I, etc) ...point inward to the text itself, where they are arranged within a system of narrative biographical discourse.

Second, they point outward to this life that has been led by the writer or this subject. (p. 21)

This form of autobiographical writing allows the author to make 'factual' claims based on personal experience. In what Denzin calls 'facticities', the author "describes how the facts were lived and experienced by interacting with individuals" (p. 23). Through this description, the written account of the lived experiences validates the author's claims as truths. Denzin continues on iterating that, "autobiographical statements are, then, viewed as a mixture of fiction and non-fiction for each text contains certain unique truths or verisimilitudes about life and particular lived experiences." (p. 24). This being the case, as a methodological choice, it is important to further back up these facticities with supportive, and complimentary research methods, including interviews with players, to understand their lived experiences in conjunction with my own (Simon, Boudreau & Silverman, Forthcoming 2007).

There are several methods that were used in order to create the content for the auto-ethnography. In order to construct a contextual narrative for this particular research question, I began with writing a reflective essay of my play history to date. This

document included my play history incorporating both experiences within the game world as well as events that occurred in my physical, everyday life. It was important to consider my personal ideas surrounding the idea of identity relating to how it manifested itself throughout my experience, taking note as to whose identity I was referring to in my writing – myself as a person, or myself as a character with its own narrative, and life history. These early writings directly informed the core of this project particularly in regards to understanding how to differentiate between identities, understanding them as an intermingled whole, potentially inseparable identity of both player and character.

From this point, I constructed a brief history of the server I was playing on prior to the research. The document included a list of the known guilds, key players and major events that occurred during my time playing the game. This allowed me to view the game server as a form of community, with inter-dependent links between players, held together by the common interest in the goals of the game. I then created a map of the players and characters that surrounded my personal play experience, using my character as the center. In the early stages of my research, my primary respondents were selected from within this pool of players.

Interviewing

These respondents were then asked to create a short document outlining their play history, including when they started playing the game, their social and goal oriented experiences during their game time, as well as their relationship to me as a player within the same game world. This allowed me to situate each interviewee within the structure of my play history but from their perspective. Prior to the formal interviews, I spent a period

of two weeks reading, coding and analyzing the content of online bulletin boards that the respondents participate in. This gave me an insight into their personality and behaviour outside of the actual gameplay environment. I believe that these posts were particularly revealing because the individuals were not inhibited by being observed or researched while posting. These threads also allowed me to see how their game identities manifested themselves outside of the context of the game.

There were 11 respondents in this initial round of interviews. Fifteen more interviews were conducted approximately a year later with randomly approached players from different servers who were unrelated to my experience as a player. This external pool of respondents was used to support or diffuse claims about the process of identity construction and maintenance in massively multi-player games. Finally, a group of peripheral interviews were conducted as part of my work as a research assistant with Prof. Bart Simon. Although these interviews were not directly related to my project on identity, they gave me further insight into the habits and life histories of players and their characters. Through their transcripts, I was able to see various forms of commitment to one's character, and therefore make deductions regarding the relationship between a player and their avatar (character) and how it influenced their in game identity.

All the interviews used directly for this thesis were conducted online, over the internet, with the exception of the interviews conducted for the Research Assistance-ship, which were a combination of face to face interviews and online interviews, depending on the location of the respondent. Each interview lasted approximately two hours and was carried out via one of several text messenger systems (AOL's Instant Messenger, MSN Messenger and/or within the game's chat engine). Although the questions were posed in a

formal, organized manner the interview itself was conversational in nature due to the personal relationships I have had with each respondent, and my knowledge of the subject matter not only as a researcher, but also as a player.

It is important to situate when there is a need for digital, online interviewing. As Taylor states in her article *Life in Virtual Worlds* (1999), the research topic will determine the capacity and relevance of the methods chosen. But to be interested in community life online, or in the case of Taylor's research, the concept of representation of self and embodiment online, then cyberspace becomes a legitimate and desirable space of inquiry. Being that the goal of this thesis is to demonstrate that identity is not reducible to the individual, by contextualizing the interviews within their social and environmental context; the method becomes meaningful for the purpose of exploring online identity.

Participant Observation

As a part of ethnographic research, participant observation allows the researcher to interact with the community in their own environment since the community can be accessed through any computer with internet access. MMOG, and internet research is unique in that the researcher must multi-task while actively participating in the daily activities of the community. They must watch attentively, observing the surroundings, the materiality of the space, architecture, use of space by the members – all of these things are telling signs of the interactions and culture of any group, while following scrolling conversations within the game. Participant observation sessions in MMOGs have the advantage of being able to be “logged”. This means that the researcher can type a command, in this case `/log`, that will record all conversation, and other textual

descriptive elements found in the game such as battle descriptions. This /log file is stored on the computer's hard drive, which then becomes a text document which can be analysed later for whatever particular element of play the researcher is looking for. As a player myself, this would allow me to play the game as I normally would, and be able to go back and open these files in a word document and analyze the conversations for markers of identity.

In researching identity for this project, initial participant observation sessions were focused on player conversations surrounding aesthetics of other playing characters in public chat channels. This could be players talking about armour choices that had to do with what 'looked good' or 'impressive' or public discussions about the importance of being able to recognize particular weapon sets, armour and guild associations. All of these examples point to some form of identity work, where players strive to be known through their physical characteristics and their social affiliations.

During traditional (offline) participant observation, the researcher must also actively listen and observe their physical surroundings. Background noises, music and conversations that the researchers themselves are not directly involved in, create atmosphere and offer important information regarding the social environment that may provide the researcher with new directions of inquiry. Within the MMOG space sounds are relatively unique to the player, voices are actually text, and other in-game sounds such as the music played in non-combat zones is an option selected individually. Furthermore, it is impossible to be cognisant of all the conversations a player may be having since it is possible to have private conversations between players that are not held in 'public' channels. With the option of /tell messages, that act as whispers that only the

whisperer and the receiver can read, there is little chance of ‘eavesdropping’ inadvertently on a conversation like one could potentially do while conducting participant observation research in a physical location.

Another element the digital research must deal with is finding the balance between play and research. For much of the game content, it is not possible for an onlooker to simply ‘tag along’ to observe the play in action. The researcher, in the case of MMOGs must immerse themselves in the playing of the game if they want to be in the active game space with their respondents. This is important for my research on identity, as identity in MMOGs is heavily invested in a player’s role and how they fulfill it, as will be later described in the chapter on roles. Therefore, as a player first and foremost, I had to negotiate the line between play (personal leisure) and research (play for work purposes), understanding the difference between my role as a researcher while fulfilling a functional role with the respondents play.

Content Analysis

I also explored several websites where players post their concerns on public discussion boards such as www.EverQuest.com, <http://www.thesafehouse.org/>, www.eqcasters.com and <http://eqvault.ign.com/>. Each of these sites contains player posted commentaries on various states of play within the game from design bugs to battle strategies. All of these sites have special forums to discuss individual aspects of the game. For this research project, I am interested in what are called the ‘class’ boards. These are website message boards that discuss specific class, or roles played within the game. Class refers to the ‘roles’ or jobs a player can choose to play within the game such

as warrior, shaman, enchanter, etc.

By examining the content of these forums, I aim to get a deeper understanding of player's perspectives on a class' role within the game. This includes how players define role expectations among their peers, the discourse that surrounds the predetermined structure of the class that is designed into the game and posts in which players define the class and its role within the game through individual appropriation of the role (pushing the limits of the class, and its 'role' within the game). This will allow us to evaluate how strongly the player community feels about the class, its role, and their power of agency in a pre-determined design.

I will also examine the content of websites provided by the game developers. In this case, access to any internal discussion is very limited as there are issues of corporate security in a very competitive industry. For the sake of this project, we will therefore rely on publicly offered websites by game designers. These sites include www.EverQuest.com, and <http://eq.crgaming.com/>, and offer comments from the game developers, as well as interviews, and interactive forum threads that allow players to discuss class issues with the game developers within a certain¹ contextual frame, often in real time or within a given pre-selected period. By looking at the 'official' intention of the designers, we can understand their creative vision of the roles designed into the game. By doing so, we are able to see how their designs affect the player community and individual identity.

¹ In this case, it would be information that the company allows their employees to discuss publicly, usually information that is near release, or currently in the testing stage of development.

Literature Review

In order to move towards discussing and understanding the process and influences of identity construction in MMOGs, as well as other digital spaces, it is important to look at the state of the literature in fields that surround the core ideas set forth throughout this thesis. This literature is not meant to be an exhaustive review of what is available in the field of identity theory, social and structural theory, game design and issues in human computer interaction (HCI), rather, the goal of this literature review is to lay the theoretical foundation for thinking about the project that lay ahead. Each text selected has to either situate the current thinking behind an idea; to demonstrate a potential need to move beyond a particular idea; or to reveal the history behind an idea that is pertinent to the theoretical foundation as a whole that will support the claims made throughout this thesis.

Avatars & Identity

Players enter the game world through the guise of their main character, which is visually represented by “a computer-generated body,” (Castronova, 2003) known as an *avatar*. The word *avatar* stems traditionally from the Sanskrit word *Avatāra*, which means "incarnation" and traditionally used to imply a “deliberate descent into mortal realms for special purposes”². In terms of virtual worlds and digital games, the idea of an avatar is somewhat reversed in that instead of being the vehicle for communication in the mortal realm, it is used as the embodied self in digital worlds, in this way, it is a fitting adaptation of the traditional term. In a sense, the utilization of the term *avatar* takes the

² [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_\(icon\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_(icon))

earthly body and makes it 'virtual' in a sense, deifying the earthly body in a virtual context. Through the virtualization of the body, the player is able to imbue meaning into the actions and interactions of the avatar within the game world.

As iterated by TL Taylor (2006), "Avatars are objects that not only represent people in the virtual world, but influence and propel the formation of identity and relationships" (p. 966). With this idea in mind, it is clear that avatars, in terms of video games, bear a unique potential of affecting and influencing the identity of the player within the game, as well as how the player constructs and maintains this identity through the play of their avatar. But to take this a step further, moving beyond the player-centric model of identity, the avatar is a component of online identity, but not necessarily the entire vehicle.

Identity is "the meanings that individuals hold for themselves – what it means to be who they are" (Burke, 2003). The purpose and manner in which identity is constructed differs depending on the particularity of each theoretical perspective and discipline. From within the fields of sociology and social psychology, we can distinguish several types of identity that, together, create an individual's overall idea, or sense of self. These include role identity (Burke, 2003; Parsons, 1965; Roberts & Donahue, 1994; Thoits, 2003), social and collective identity (Ellemers, Spears & Doojse, 1999; Jenkins, 1996) and personal identity (Glover 1991; Parfit, 1971; Perry, 2002).

Identity that is associated with one's place or role in the society that they live in, such as being a mother, or a man, judge or school teacher is often defined as "role-identities" (Thoits, 2003) and is often associated with traditional role theory (Merton, 1957; Parsons, 1967; Turner, 1952). These roles bear with them inherent identifying

elements that are relatively socially stable, even though the roles are not so concrete that they cannot be somewhat personalized. Essentially, role identity is often externally imposed by definition or by others.

Social and collective identities can be defined as shared meanings among a group of individuals surrounding a particular cause or state. According to Jenkins (1996), “social identity is the constitution in social practice of the intermingling, and inseparable themes of human similarity and difference” (p. 90) while he defines collective (social) identity as something that constructs and emphasizes similarity. Ethnic, gender and national are examples of identities that fall under these definitions.

Role identities are the meanings that we assign to our functional roles through social norms and expectations (Burke, 2003; Parsons, 1965). Roles have contextual definitions, which exist within the collective imagination of a society. The role of ‘mother’ ‘firefighter’ or ‘student’ all carry with them a certain amount of shared meaning. Through perception and fulfillment of roles, individuals internalize these shared meanings, and filter them through their personal identity to create individualized role identity.

Often, personal, social and role identities can come into conflict, as personal morals or ideals conflict with group norms. Deviation from role expectations can cause a rift among the social community, potentially isolating individuals. However, it is also an opportunity for role definitions to be redefined on both a collective and personal level (Burke, 2003). Individuals also identify themselves as different among roles of sameness. Although one may share the collective meaning of being a woman, she may still differentiate herself from other women based on attributes of her personal identity.

Within a social structure, there is a constant balancing act between the level of difference among individuals and the level of shared social meaning. Through the process of balancing between the two, personal, social and role identities are shaped and redefined.

According to basic theories of symbolic interactionism, identity is the result of a process of negotiation through social interaction in cyclical ritual of perception, interpretation and internalization (Blumer, 1967; Cooley, 1902; Mead 1934). Responses are not made directly to the actions of one another but instead are based on the meaning that they attach to the actions. It is through these attached meanings that individuals internalize perceptions of self which in turn lead to concepts of identity construction in a cyclical process. It is through this cycle that negotiation of meaning occurs.

Thinking of identity as something that is constructed, we look to Biesta (1994) who discusses the post-modern position of identity as he writes that identity is “something ‘produced in a whole range of discursive practices – economic, social and political” (p. 1). Although the purpose behind the construction may differ, Biesta acknowledges that “identity has become an invention” (p. 1). This idea fits with those in post colonial studies which iterate that “identity should be considered an ongoing process of redefining oneself and of the invention and reinvention of one’s own history” (Bauman, 2004; p. 7). Of course, Bauman goes on to talk about the invention of identity as a political necessity, meant to instil a sense of meaning, and a sense of belonging within a community, and on a larger scale, within a nation. He writes that “... the question of identity needs to concern itself once again with what it really is; a socially necessary convention” (p. 7). Whether for a sense of personal fulfilment or for the sake of national unity, identity is nonetheless something that is constructed through interacting

elements outside the self, be they physical, social or political.

The concept of 'identity as invention' as described above finds a new relevance in the digital age. As Turkle (1995) discusses identity in the age of the internet, she writes that online, we have the freedom to 'create' our selves through the fluid space of the internet. This is clearly iterated when Turkle writes that "the internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize post-modern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create" (p. 180). Although this is hardly a new idea, as Foucault (1994) writes that 'techniques of the self' have been present in almost all cultures as ways to shape and define the individual, what differs is the context and space in which the techniques occur.

Turkle (1995) describes the internet as a place/space in which individuals have the ability to test our identity and perception of self in a relative anonymous environment. The internet is often a social space which allows people to explore alternative identities, different from their everyday, daily lives. "When identity was defined as unitary and solid, it was relatively easy to recognize and censure deviation from a norm. A more fluid sense of self allows a greater capacity for acknowledging diversity" (p. 261). It is within this new found multiplicity of self that allows for the possibilities for greater flexibility, enabling the diversity of identity that Turkle discusses. Turkle continues on to explore the difference between the tangible world and the virtual world in terms of accountability and responsibility stating;

In the physically embodied world, we have no choice but to assume responsibility for our body's actions. The rare exceptions simply prove the

rule as when someone with multiple personality disorder claims that a crime was committed by an 'alter' personality over which he or she has no control or we rule someone mentally incompetent to stand trial (p. 254).

Following this argument, in face to face interactions, there is a physical self that becomes accountable for ones actions perhaps because the physical self lives in a physical society where physical identity markers are important or because one cannot as easily change their identity as they can in cyberspace. This is important if we are to consider the idea that multiplicity of identities makes it more difficult to recognize deviations of norms. In cyberspace, the ease of logging into one account or another or under one username or another makes it difficult to assign accountability for an action to one physical person. In essence, accountability becomes attached to an identity and not a person.

Returning to Biesta's (1991) idea that we are able to invent ourselves, Turkle (1995) states that, "the internet is another element of computer culture that has contributed to thinking about identity as multiplicity. On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves" (p. 178). It is not so much the fact that individuals cycle through roles online, but that it is done at such speed, without any seeming continuity between roles, potentially leading to a fragmented sense of self.

From the traditional idea that 'healthy' identity was a unitary affair and stemmed from stability in ones role, Turkle continues on to ask the question of how identity within the self exists without communication between identities, she replies that the key is negotiation between selves through diversity. Her response to this and the issue of 'healthy minds' is clear when she states that social theory needs to redefine theories of

identity to match the current multiplicity of roles one holds in contemporary western society. She writes that, “Now, in post-modern times, multiple identities are no longer so much at the margin of things. Many more people experience identity as a set of roles that can be mixed and matched, whose diverse demands need to be negotiated” (p. 180).

Within contemporary society, fragmentation and multiplicity of roles is considered the social norm, therefore, theories of identity construction must acknowledge the necessity of shifting boundaries and fluid movement between roles and ultimately identities. Burke (2003) discusses the relationship the individual has among multiple identities as a necessary part of identity construction and maintenance in contemporary individuals.

According to Burke, each role carries with it its own identity, defined as “... the number of ‘distinct self-aspects’ that one has. Distinct self-aspects are roles, relationships, traits, or activities that do not share attributes or meanings” (p. 196). As social interactions occur, multiple identities are activated within the individual that influences the behavior within the situation. As these identities are activated, they are processed through what Burke calls a ‘perceptual control system’. This is essentially a checks and balance system among identities to verify for congruency of meaning and perception. If there is conflict among the identities that are activated it will result in either deviant behavior, or a redefining of the meaning of the identity in question.

Social interaction is important on an external level as well because;

...individuals hold many identities, when one individual with a certain identity meets another because of the context of that identity, the identities of the two persons other than the ones that brought them together may

become relevant and activated in unexpected ways. ... (Thus) the network of relations expands as identities find new ways of verifying themselves by activating relevant identities in other individuals (p. 202)

Such negotiation occurs through the interactions with others within the game space of MMORPG's, demonstrating the complexity of roles through player and avatar. The relationship between the player and their avatar takes Turkle's (1995) idea of 'multiple identities', commonly thought of as being within the individual, one step further into a splintering of selves into two separate yet inherently attached bodies while giving the player a disembodied second self (the avatar) with which they can activate and negotiate identities.

What is interesting about the relationship between the avatar and the player is how it alters the process of identification. If, as Cohen (2001) writes, "identification requires that we forget ourselves and become the other – that we assume for ourselves the identity of the target of our identification" (p. 247) then the fact that we not only assume the identity of the other, which in the case of MMOGs is the avatar, we are the simultaneously self and other. Videogame play allows the player to "surrender(s) consciousness of his or her own identity and experiences the world through someone else's point of view. Identification leads to the (temporary) adoption of an external point of view and to viewing the world through an alternative social reality" (p. 248). At the same time, this level of identification occurs while allowing the player to alter the events through choices that stem from within the player, merging the role and identity of the player with the role and identity of the avatar.

Roles, Structure & Design

According to Burke (2003) "... the relationship between multiple identities is an issue of the link between social structure and the individual" (p. 195). Individuals are attached to the larger social structure through their role identities within a society. Whether the society is located in physical or digital space, each individual belonging to a community fulfills at least one role within it. We are born into particular roles – son and daughter, and subscribe to others – policeman, archbishop – by choice. Regardless of whether it is assigned or subscribed, Berger (1972) states that "...in each case, it (identity) is appropriated by the individual through a process of interaction with others. It is others who identify him in a specific way. Only if an identity is confirmed by others is it possible for that identity to be real to the individual holding it" (p. 66). In this context, Berger defines identity as "the socialized part of the self" (p. 66). Essentially, for identity is a product of inclusion in that one must be a part of a community or social group in order for identity to be constructed and maintained.

Arendt (1958) and Hall (1991) view the process of identity construction as a process that is founded on the principle of exclusion. Identity is constructed through 'otherness, by comparing the self to an external 'other'. I speak English not German, therefore my identity of being English is reified by my not being German. For Hall otherness falls into a binary opposition of what I am is what I am not (p. 235). For Arendt (1958), language and action are the tools that humans have to express this form of otherness.

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world, and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon

ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity...It may be stimulated by the presence of others whose company we may wish to join, but it is never conditioned by them (pp. 176-177).

This opposes Berger's (1972) idea that identities are both assigned and subscribed. For Arendt (1958), they are essentially, what we make of them even if the assigned identities are ones of choice. One could elaborate here and say that it the choice comes into play when deciding to accept or deviate from definitional norms of our role. Although we define ourselves through the 'other', we are nonetheless in charge of our identity through the interaction with others, but it is "by our own initiative" (p. 177) that we form our uniqueness and distinction (self in form of identity). Although we can understand this to mean that identity stems from an internal desire, it is only truly confirmed through the presence of others.

Arendt continues on to state that although we control what we express to others to create our identity, much of our actions speak for themselves as well. Our identity is expressed in our very being, this is evident when Arendt writes;

The disclosure of 'who' in contradistinction to 'what' somebody is – his qualities, gifts, talents and shortcomings, which he may display or hide – is implicit in everything somebody says and does. It can be hidden only in complete silence and perfect passivity (p. 179).

This brings us back to a symbolic interactionist perspective of identity construction. Goffman (1959) recounts a story about a stranger coming to dinner who tries to control his actions to create the perceptions of self to others (p. 239), the stranger is not aware that those inside the cottage can see their expressions and body language, and notice that a 'social face' is put on just as the stranger is about to enter. Our physical and sometimes subconscious behaviour speaks volumes to who we are, regardless of our attempt to control our identity. This can lead to a situation where our actions and words are not aligned with the impression that they are given off, often giving others a misconstrued idea of who they are.

In a digital space such as the game-world of an MMOG, the action of an avatar is limited to the game's design (Taylor, 2003), limiting the player's control over their 'physical' actions within the confines of their roles. The creation of an avatar is a fundamental element of identity construction that is in the hands of both the player and designer. Since digital space is limited, and storylines of games require, at times, a genre-specific type of avatar, the choice of avatar selection by the player is limited to the choices offered by the designers.

Contradicting Turkle's (1995) perception of social instability through the fluidity of cycling through multiple identities that other spaces online permit, MMOG's require players to develop a stable identity through the creation and development of an avatar if a player wants to progress through the game. It also brings us back to accountability in cyberspace, as the player is now tied to a stable representation of self within the game world. With this notion of stability, the player is faced with an opportunity to develop an identity within the game space and context.

Since a player does not 'create' the avatar, it might be better to think of identity in video games as more of an act of appropriation than one of creation. This is not to say that there is no process of identity construction, just that the player is not in complete creative control – much like being born into a gender, race or class allows an individual only so much space in which to 'create' or 'invent' their identity.

The idea of creation of self through digital space is further developed by Rehak (2003) when he discusses the use of the visual representation of an 'avatar' in video games as a form of 'Playing at Being'. The avatar is "...presented as a human player's double, merges spectatorship and participation in ways that fundamentally transform both activities" (p. 103). By being able to create a visual representation of self in a digital space such as a video game, we are not only able to play with our perceptions of self and our internalized concept of identity, but we are able to visually alter how we choose to represent ourselves without any tangible, physical changes to our everyday, physical selves.

Identity in video games is further developed by the players through "...creative innovations in verbal dialogue and non-verbal expressions" (Wright, Boria & Breidenbach, 2002, p. 1) among many other forms of interaction. Wright describes the verbal action as textual communication within the game space and the non-verbal as the outside appropriation of the game. In the case of MMOGs, we can see the outside appropriation in guild websites, websites dedicated to in-game content that is created collectively among players, message boards and other game related web spaces.

In looking at the relationship between the designer and avatar creation, and the impact it has on the players in terms of identity formation Taylor (2003) states that

“...software and design shapes the world in advance of the user’s arrival (as well as the dynamic relationship between users and software)...” (p. 25). From this standpoint, the true identity work within a structured and limited video game would be through player actions and social interactions with the physical game space as well as with other players.

But these interactions are affected by other design issues such as the game’s rules and the game’s ‘fiction’ (Juul, 2006). The rules of the game define what the player is able to do within the boundaries of ‘fair’ play. I emphasize the word fair, as players are always able to break the rules and still deceptively play the game (DeKoven, 2006; Fine, 1983). The rules define the ‘norms’ of play and of the roles within the game. For Juul (2006) a game’s fiction is the world in which the rules are confined (p. 121). The game world frames the players experience and essentially influences their capacity for identity construction and maintenance. Through interactions with different game fictions, players are confronted with different opportunities.

Creating a Digital Self

In order to live, you have to be born. We are used to thinking about coming into the world as someone else's doing. My birth was a product of the relationship between my mother and my father. My physical features were a product of genetics, beyond my parents or my control. Life in a virtual world works a bit differently, but the fundamental ideas of birth remain the same, with a little more control on the side of the person being 'born' (Suler, 2002; Turkle, 1995).

In massively multi-player online games (MMOGs), a player must be 'born' into the game world as well. Once the game software is purchased and installed on the player's computer the player must now create an avatar (character) to navigate during gameplay. There are many elements that go into creating one's avatar, from selecting one's gender and physical attributes, to choosing their name and race; players begin to create their identity through the game's design and further develop it through gameplay and social interaction. But character creation is not the end of identity creation; in MMOGs identity is created through the relationship between the player and their character as well as through relationships with other playing characters within the game space. Identity construction is further complicated by the necessary interaction with the game's environment as well as the unpredictable actions of other playing characters within the same game space.

This chapter will describe the process a player must go through to create a digital avatar, in terms of the game's options, as well as the personal preferences that players bring into the game with them. The creation of an avatar is the beginning of the process of identity construction and maintenance that the player will be confronted with

throughout their gameplay experience.

For some players, it is an easy, relatively mindless task, randomly clicking through the options, taking the first thing that pops up, and opting for the random name selector to save on time. As explained to me by one respondent; "... I really just wanted to get in and play. What I looked like didn't really matter. I knew that my friends had already started playing and knowing that they were already level 10, I had to hurry up and get in there".

But not all players rush into the game without much thought to the avatar they create. Upon further conversation, the respondent confessed that not all of the details were haphazard, telling me how he had always enjoyed playing trolls in other fantasy games, and when he saw that it was among race options, he instinctively chose a troll to trod around the game world. For the most part though, the goal was to get into the game world and play as soon as possible; and even though there was a bit of thought put into the creation of his avatar, it was his first character created, which he remained faithful to until the end of his playing days.

For many other players, the process of creating their avatar is a painstakingly long one; scrolling through each potential feature, thinking about what characteristic best suits the character they are trying to create. It is not uncommon for this type of player to create a complete character, often taking many hours of selecting, testing and returning to the main menu to try out another look.

Character Creation

When a player enters the game for the first time, they must create a character from the selection of predetermined options available. This character, which is in the form of

an avatar, is how players navigate throughout the game world. Beyond the first step of accepting the game company's terms of service (ToS) and filling in specific account information into a log in screen, the player is brought to a 'character select' screen. Once here, the players determine aesthetic characteristics for their avatar beginning with selecting their avatar's gender.

Gender

On first glance, this may appear to be an easy selection having only two choices, but there is a lot more behind selecting gender in a virtual world. There are many different reasons for players to want to play a gender other than their 'actual' physical gender. For some players, this is an opportunity to play under the guise of a different gender than they occupy in their physical world (Bruckman, 1993; Cassells & Jenkins, 1998; Nakamura, 1995). 'Gender swapping' in the game space allows players to experience (whether realistically or not is another issue) social life from the perspective of a different gender. For some players it is an opportunity to avoid some of the sexism they feel in their everyday lives. After I had played with one respondent for several weeks, she confessed to me that she wished she had chosen a male avatar, stating that she was tired of getting private messages sent to her about her revealing outfit (most female avatars are designed with a heterosexual adolescent male in mind in terms of assets and outfits). She felt that her abilities to play the game were not taken seriously. In one conversation she explained to me that "girls are just treated differently, ppl [people] give you things for no reason except ur a chick...sometimes they dont even care if ur a chick irl [in real life], its like they just see this hot elven chick and want to help her". As a female gamer who had played a female avatar for the duration of my play time in

EverQuest, I could relate. Shortly after this conversation, she had made a male character to see how different the play would be. About a week later, we were talking about it again, and she described how different her time in the game was, as she put it “it is so quiet! no one bothers with me really – sheessh sometimes ppl³ dont even answer me when I ask a qst [question]... oh well, I guess its better than being asked if they are real all the time hehe”.

It is not just women who choose to play male characters as a form of escapism of their every day lives, but male players also have a tendency to play characters of their opposite sex⁴, but often for different reasons than their female counterparts (Yee, 2005). For some males, the sexiness of the female avatars was enough to warrant their selection. As one player commented to me about why he chose to play a female avatar “if I am going to sit here and play a game for 15 hours a day, I might as well have something hot to stare at while im killing mobs all day”. For other male players, the choice to play a female avatar was for the same reasons that female gamers had provided for not choosing a female avatar. They liked the attention that was showered upon them, and as one of my guild mates explained to me, “I don’t even have to do anything and ppl give me stuff and help me even without asking – wow its cool to be a chick!”.

Finally, both male and female players who I spoke with cited role-play preference as a reason to select a particular gender when creating an avatar in an MMOG. One female player said she preferred to play a male wizard because back when she started playing table top role playing games with her brothers, there were no female options.

⁴ <http://www.joystiq.com/2006/07/30/male-gamers-female-avatars-ftw/>,
<http://kotaku.com/gaming/mmo/one-mans-descent-into-gaming-gender-bending-224395.php>

Although she could now play a female wizard in EverQuest, she felt committed to her role as a male wizard in other games, and felt that she was committed to the role now, regardless of the game. Commitment to a character is another element that contributes to player/avatar identity that will be elaborated further below.

Race

Once the player selects their gender, they must then choose the race they will play. The player has a choice of 15 races that fall under two loose categories; those that depict human characteristics such as Human, High Elf, Wood Elf, and Barbarians and non human (although still anthropomorphic) such as Vah Shir (cat people), Froglok (bi-pedal frogs), Iksar (bi-pedal lizards). Identification through race within the game is important not only because of individual race preferences, but also because of the in-game folklore that defines the relationships between races – potentially limiting or challenging game play for the player (Hayot & Wesp, E, 2004).

Each race has their own, unique characteristics that advance certain types of game play. For example, a barbarian is naturally strong, therefore if a player chooses to play a barbarian character they can select classes (or jobs) that benefit from the particular assets of the barbarian class. It would be strategic for a barbarian or an ogre to select appropriate, strength requiring classes such as the warrior. Races with high intelligence have a greater success rate performing the duties of a class (or role) that requires them to have a higher intelligence, for instance many of the arcane classes such as mage, wizard, and enchanter. Certain races cannot select particular classes due to the coded game design. A high elf, which boasts an elevated level of wisdom by default, but low level of strength, cannot be a warrior no matter how much the player would like to. These unique

characteristics help define the avatar, and its role to other players.

Each race begins the game in a different part of the game world, referred to as a starting city. This city is populated predominantly by non-playing characters (NPC) of the same race. Within the game's lore, not all races are compatible, although a first time player will not necessarily know this before entering the game space. Racial rivalries are a potentially important element for players to consider seeing that cities are protected by guards of the hometown's race. This affects game play because citizens of a particular city will not welcome races they are in conflict with. For lower level avatars, merely coming near to a rival's city gates will result in death by the hands of the guards. Therefore, although a player may not actively play their race to the fullest capacity of the game's lore, perhaps by ignoring other playing characters of a rival race, this history constructs a form of identity for the player. The avatar carries a narrative, or pre-determined history programmed by the design of the game, before the birth of the avatar through the player's selections.

Most cities are dispersed throughout the game-world so that it is difficult to travel from city to city at low levels. This means that early socialization for most players occurs with other avatars of the same race, especially if they do not already have higher level friends playing the game. For some players, this creates a sense of nationalistic identification attached to the traditional idea of a city-state, instilling a sense of belonging to a particular location. Although most of the players I spoke to directly claimed that this made little to no difference to them, they admitted that it nevertheless structured their early play, creating a form of nostalgic identity. One player recounts the first time he was high enough level to travel outside the outskirts of town, and being a little taken aback

when seeing an array of races for the first time. Although he knew that there were a range of choices to select from when he created his character, after spending so much time around the same 'faces' he said he was a little taken aback with the variety when he finally did venture out. It was "like leaving suburbia and heading to the big city!" he observed. Suddenly, he was faced with a multi-cultural game space of sorts.

As a long time player, I spent several years playing a Barbarian in Everquest. Barbarians are born in the remote northern town of Halas. The town is filled with stereotypical barbaric landscape; strewn with pubs and fur draped vendors willing to sell you a hearty pint of ale and a gargantuan sword. For the first 15 levels or so, which would translate into about a month and a half of actual play time for most players, I was surrounded by other barbarians sharing similar physical characteristics. Although I was happy to leave Halas, when I was finally capable of traveling further distances within the game, searching for new adventures, I always looked back on my time in Halas fondly. As my avatar, Velixious, matured through the increase in levels and experience, we would often travel back to Halas, taking a walk through the snowy streets and trying to remember where the merchant's house was. We recalled the sometimes fond, sometimes frustrating times we had spent there, which felt like eons ago. During the 5 years of play, I always identified myself as a player with a barbarian narrative within the game.

For many players, their race selection bears some personal significance, perhaps stemming from a childhood fondness towards a particular character from a fantasy tale or from mythology. I have always preferred snowy weather and Nordic scenery, dreaming of Scandinavian travels as a child and consuming as much Nordic mythology as possible as an adolescent. It came as no surprise to those who knew me that I had chosen to play a

Barbarian who started life in EverQuest in the snowy hills as opposed to one of the sylph-like Elvin classes whose starting cities were in the balmy green meadows, near the water's edge.

Another potential motivation for a player's race selection is exemplified by those who have a prior fantasy play history. Respondents have mentioned that they would often carry over their role playing preferences from other games such as Dungeon & Dragons. Among the player's I spoke to, those who played other MMOGs also tended to continue playing a particular race they had played in another game. For others, the lure of playing a gnome in a virtual world is irresistible when standing 6 foot 3 in their everyday life. "It's a chance to see the world from a different vantage point" one player tells me, "and when you run, since you are so much closer to the ground it feels like I'm going so much faster than if I was a sluggish ogre ... it makes things fun". , Some players really want a unique experience, enjoying the chance to experience life outside of their species. One player tells me how he will only play a lizard or a frog; "How many chances will I get in this life to be an ass-kicking lizard with an awesome sword ...I mean, I get to be human everyday". In such cases, a player is able to experience the sense of what it is like to be something other than what they are. By being able to see the world through a gnome's vantage point, or experience the irregular walking patterns of a lizard, the player is able to experience a different physicality not possible in their everyday, physical lives.

These are only a few of the things that factor into a player's race choice but each one contributes to the identity of the avatar within the game, and ultimately determines how the character will be perceived within the game space.

Physical Attributes, Names & Deity

After selecting the gender and the race of the character one wishes to play, it is time to move on to more specific details such as facial features, eyes - shape and color, and hair – style, and color, to name but a few. These are the details that some players rush through, selecting the default models in order to get into the game and play. While other players take their time and carefully select each physical attribute, contemplating each possible choice before clicking on the accept button to finalize their avatar.

There are many reasons behind the selections that players make when creating their avatars. Some players choose attributes that conform to traditional western standards of beauty, opting for the softest of complexions, flowing hair, svelte bodies – perhaps giving them a chance to escape the limitations of their everyday lives and live vicariously through the beauty of a mythical avatar. Other players may make a conscious decision to create an avatar as flamboyant and original as possible in order to stand out in the crowd. With a limited amount of race options combined with the limited amount of various attributes, there are only so many possible aesthetic combinations; therefore it is important to some players to try to be unique from the beginning. Alternatively, some players want to create an avatar that represents their physical, earthly bodies. It could be argued that by selecting physical attributes that reflect their physical selves, the player has the potential to feel more immersed into the game world. In all of these cases, the lines are blurred between escapism and extension of self, but through gameplay, inevitably the life of a ‘gamer’ encompasses both of them.

A player, and close friend of mine, described the creation of the avatar he made for his wife, in an attempt to lure her into the game so they could experience it together.

“I took my time when I made my wife’s avatar. I wanted her to like her, to look at her and think, hey – that’s me! That way ... I mean, how could she say no – if the avatar looks like her a bit you know?”. He recounted how he had tried to incorporate parts of her personality into the avatar as well. “She likes nature, always likes to be outside in the yard with the dogs, talking walks in the woods – so I made her a Wood Elf... they are kinda earthy and live in the forest”. Sure enough, his wife enjoyed the sentiment, and appreciated the attention to detail her husband had taken. From the eye color to the closest hairstyle, she said she could imagine herself in the game world; it is what she believed that she would look like if she were an animated character.

The final stage in the character creation process is to select a name for the avatar. . Although it is possible simply to click on a button for a randomly generated name in the fantasy genre, the game offers the possibility to create your own name. Name selection is connected to identity because there can only be one name of its kind per server, this feature is the defining step in identity.

The naming of one’s character is one of the most identifying elements within video games, even more so than character creation, it is the one unique element that a player brings into the game. Wright et al (2002) talks about the importance of naming one’s character in the online game of Counter-Strike:

All Counter-Strike players shed the use of their given names, taking an “online” name. The generic name, “Player”, is given to every player when they begin. However, not changing or personalizing one’s online name is frowned upon by experienced game players, because it marks one as either inexperienced or unwilling to be identified, therefore suspect. (p. 5)

This is similar to Smith's (2003) work on avatars and how players create trust in online games through stability of recognition. Similar to Wright et al's (2003) ideas, Smith (2003) talks about the importance of accountability; "The respondents, in fact, agreed to a high degree that it should be possible to hold others accountable by attaching labels to their user profiles...Also the responses stressed the importance of persistent identities" (p. 7). In a sense, this is an apropos response to the accountability issues raised by Turkle (1995) where she believes that the internet offers a space where user accountability disappears. According to Turkle, the fluidity of the internet offers users relative anonymity. Although I would not disagree with the fact that the actual player has the potential to exist in her assumed relative anonymity, the avatar does not. It is in this way that naming in a world like EverQuest, offers avatar (or persona) stability, but not necessarily player identity. Essentially, this is an important distinction when thinking about accountability and identity within a server community.

Finally, all classes have must choose to worship one of several deities⁵. Not all deities are available for selection; rather, they are designed into the game specific to the race and class of a character. A Necromancer, known to follow lore similar to that of black magic, cannot choose to follow the light bearing god of a Paladin, which is known to follow the path of good. . Each deity carries its own unique narrative within the game. Although the role of one's deity is relatively insignificant in terms of the grander scheme of game play, it does offer players deity specific quests relating to weaponry and armour. Also, a deity is intrinsically attached to one's race; it carries the same consequences when travelling to cities that are not friendly towards that particular race/deity combination.

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EverQuest_Deities

Essentially, the use of deity within the game enhances the back-story of the character, which offers another level of character diversity and identity among players.

Class/Roles

After gender and race are selected, the player must select their class. This is essentially their ‘job’ or function, within the game world. Players can pick from among traditional fantasy inspired roles such as wizards, enchanters, clerics, paladins, warriors, shaman, to name but a few. Each race is limited as to what class they can be. As mentioned above, a High Elf cannot chose to be a warrior and a Barbarian cannot opt to be an enchanter. Therefore, players must select within the confines of the pre-determined class selections based on their race selection. Some combinations are more common than others such as a High Elf or Erudite wizard, while others, such as a gnome cleric, are playable but not without some difficulty. Much like an avatar’s race, selecting a class can also be a very personal choice. Some players prefer to be a caster, who battles from a distance lobbing spells towards the enemy. Spell-casters are an integral part of any hunting party, but they remain, physically, on the peripherals of any battle. Many casters who I played with and interviewed told me that they preferred to be removed from the action. “I get nervous when my screen is bombarded with mobs⁶”. For this player, being a fighter would impede his potential play enjoyment resulting in his choice to play a casting class. Sometimes, this is not evident prior to entering the game space, especially if the player has no previous role play game (RPG) experience. This often results in players creating one character, and abandoning the avatar after attempting to play through

⁶ mobs are in game monsters that the players often (but not always) group together to kill in order to complete quests, or to accumulate skill points to acquire levels.

several levels. When I first started playing, I created a High Elf Enchanter. After only a few weeks of play, I realized that I did not enjoy being an enchanter. I found it frustrating to be physically frail and wholly dependent on arcane magic, which led me to create my second character, a barbarian shaman that goes by the name of Velixious. She became my primary character from that point on.

Once a player selects their class, they must then distribute skill points among a selection of attributes such as strength, charisma, intelligence, wisdom and agility. Each class has a unique grouping of attributes, and the development of these skills is necessary in order to be successful throughout the character's gameplay experience. As the character develops through the acquisition of levels, they are given more skill points to distribute, therefore personalizing the avatar. Different players opt to distribute these skill points differently depending on their play style, although there is a 'preferred distribution'⁷ which is considered to be the 'best choice' of point distribution in order to maximize each class' abilities.

Much of this system derives from the traditional pen and paper role playing game Dungeons and Dragons, as a result privileging players with previous experience playing this popular game because they understand what each skill set means within the context of game play. I remember when I first started playing EverQuest, although I had watched my partner play for almost two months, I never really paid attention to his accumulation of skill points. When Velixious started to accumulate levels, and she was upgrading her armour, I remember having no idea what "AC" meant. I noticed that all armour pieces had a number next to the letters AC. After about of month of dying more often than I

⁷ <http://eq.crgaming.com/creationguides/necromancer.asp>

should have, my partner asked me what the 'ac' was on my vest. When I replied a ridiculously low number, he gave me a smug look, telling me that even though it was pretty, it was lousy, protecting me like damp cardboard. It was then that he explained to me that AC meant "armour class" which, as defined by Wikipedia, is "a derived statistic which indicates how difficult it is to hit a character with an attack. Of course, I would have known this if I had played Dungeons & Dragons.

Although understanding the use of 'AC' is an important part of playing the game if your goal is to accumulate levels and experience, by wearing the chest plate that did not match my level, it signalled something to the other players around me; either that I had made a conscious (and perhaps aesthetic) decision to wear an inappropriate chest plate, or that I did not understand certain elements of the game play. Either of these conclusions might impact how other players interact with me depending on their play/social goals.

There are many online guides that can help the player with these decisions, but in the beginning, these first few points are relatively harmless even if the player distributes them in an unbalanced fashion. Throughout game play, level acquisition and upgrades in the avatar's armour, weapons and spells (if the particular class is a spell-caster) work towards upgrading the original set of skill points. These roles are evolved and refined throughout a character's career through skill and level accumulation. For some players, the distribution of skill points is a very important part of the game. By attempting an uncommon distribution of skill points, some players see it as a challenge to attempt to fulfill the function of their class role outside of the 'design norms'. This type of play defines them as a particular type of player making their avatar unique.

Although a player may choose to play more than one character, the character they currently occupy within the game space is what defines the character to the player as well as to others. The player who plays more than one character can indeed define themselves as more than just a cleric, or just a warrior – but as a unique hybrid of both, exhibited through their play choices and styles, since the player will accumulate knowledge from one character that may potentially affect their definition of self when playing another character. Simply put, a player who has both a high level warrior and a high level cleric can use information they learned about a particular mob or zone when playing one character and use this information to benefit the second character. This in turn affects the character's identity to other players as a player who, through their alternate play experiences, can demonstrate an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of their party members.

Once in the game as a particular class, players can choose to participate in a set of skill trades. These are not necessary by the game's design, but serve a purpose of fulfilling secondary needs within the game space. For example, a player can be a cleric, which is the player's primary function or role within the game narrative, but can also perform duties as a tailor. This deepens the identity of the character, because their skill level within their chosen trade is combined with their play level within their class role. This combination defines the character as a unique individual within the game. A player can be viewed as the primary healer when in group combat as a cleric. In tranquil time the same player can fulfill the role of a tailor creating garments for his fellow players. Although tailoring does not directly affect the cleric's role of healing, it becomes a secondary defining factor in the cleric's identity within the game. The game play and

social function of class roles will be further developed in the following chapters.

Summary

Once all of these options have been selected the player can enter the game world. Each step of the character creation process requires some level of awareness on the part of the player. This is what I call *conscious identity construction*. The conscious choices a player makes when creating their avatar is a relevant point of departure towards understanding the process of identity construction and maintenance in the game world because these choices are influenced by personal ideals, values, and even fantasies. There are many facets to the conscious construction of identity within the context of MMORPG's that differ significantly from that of the tangible world (everyday life). From avatar selection and statistical placement to character naming and speech in game, the player is either forced to make choices blindly or based on a presupposed knowledge of the game and a creative or internal desire of how they want to represent themselves within the game-space. These elements all work towards creating a persona, or character, that is familiar to other players – or at least the identity of the avatar, which will be presented to other playing characters. However, it is important to understand this as a beginning, an entry point into a more complex networked system of interaction.

The Building Blocks of Play

All games are built around rules of play (Fines, 1983; Juul, 2006; Salen & Zimmerman, 2006). Found between the rules of the game that delineate the “limitations and affordances” of play (Juul, 2006) and the ‘fiction’ of the game, the “worlds that the game presents and the player imagines” (p. 121), these are the building blocks of play. These blocks are the individual elements between rules and fiction that create the gameplay experience, “... not the rules themselves, the game tree, or the game’s fiction but the way the game is actually played” (p. 83). According to Heaton (2006)

Gameplay occurs when the player interacts with the game ... the interaction is not random, it is a flow of information from the game to the player and from the player back to the game. The interaction is circular – the flow is always in the same direction and no stage can be missed.

(Introduction, para. 5)

However, within the circular flow of Heaton’s gameplay, there are individual elements of play within the ‘game’ stage that the player must negotiate before they continue through the larger cycle of play. Although the elements of gameplay are cumulative, they are not necessarily circular in the sense that they are not closed systems that reoccur as identical patterns of play. Acknowledging the works on the ‘cycles of gameplay’ put forth by Gee (2003), Grodal (2003) and Perron (2006), among many others, the following section aims to focus on the development of specific elements of gameplay that lead to the construction of identity and its maintenance through patterns and repetition.

Drawing on participation observation sessions in the game space, the goal of this

chapter is to explore the way that individual elements of gameplay designed into the game influence identity construction and maintenance, making the process of play meaningful to the player within the context of the game. Looking at three individual elements of play, which I classify as *actions*, *tasks*, and *goals*, I will present how identity is further developed through an accumulation of play patterns that emerge from gameplay.

The combination of these three elements shape gameplay into a relatively universal game experience for most players. Through class roles such as that of a cleric, warrior or wizard, players are able to perform individual *actions* that are required to complete *tasks* that lead to the fulfillment of *goals*. As players move through each of these elements, a pattern of play is created. Patterns are not cyclical in that players can participate in many different patterns of play at the same time. It is not necessary for one pattern to be completed before another can begin; patterns run parallel to each other as well begin and end at different times.

Each play pattern has the potential to lead to the reshaping and redefinition of the character's role through the individual choices a player makes throughout the play process. As players negotiate the elements of play, they are faced with a responsibility towards the game's design, to other players, and to the player's avatar. Each level of responsibility affects the pattern of play on a different level. A player may only perform certain actions, tasks, and goals found within the construct of the game, specific to their character role and acceptable within the scope of social norms within the game community.

Through the accumulation of individualized play patterns, a player often develops

a sense of commitment to the character they are playing; to the community they play in and to the game as a whole. Together, the elements of play, sense of responsibility and embedded commitment influence the avatar in terms of its aesthetics, purpose, and social identity, to both the player themselves and those in the game world with them.

Actions, Tasks & Goals

To break down the gameplay elements within the game space, actions can be thought of as simple movements and basic interactions that a player has with the environment and other players throughout gameplay. An action is a singular movement within the game that bears little meaning alone, but collectively, an action creates the pieces necessary to define the tasks that lead to goals within the game. A player choosing to wave and smile by entering the specific emote command (such as /wave; /smile) when greeting other players is an easy mundane example of an action that serves as a basic minimal interaction which nevertheless play a part in the larger scheme of the game. In this case, the emote creates a social interaction that has the potential to form relationships that become relevant to the overall game experience by shaping a social identity. All playing characters have the potential to perform actions that are meaningful to the game in terms of character advancement. Individual actions that a character performs are essentially meaningless acts in and of themselves but performed within the context of gameplay becomes a defining element in terms of role fulfillment and character development.

In this sense, the meaningful accumulation of actions becomes a task. *Tasks* are the result of a series or a meaningful pattern of actions. For example, in order for a spell-caster such as a cleric to scribe a new spell, they must perform a series of actions. If the

spell is already in their inventory, the player must enter into their inventory screen (an action) and select the proper spell (action), and then right click on the spell they want to scribe (action). In order to scribe the spell, the character must be in a sitting position; the act of sitting is also another action. Put all these actions together and the result is the 'task' of scribing a spell. A short-term hunting group is another example of a task. Here, players work together towards a particular purpose such as gaining experience points. These points are necessary in order for a character to advance in level standing. The easiest ways to accumulate points is by repeatedly killing mobs (monsters), as each mob is worth a predetermined set of experience points. This is often called 'camping' because the group usually stays in one spot or region and kills the monsters as they reappear after a certain period of time after they have been killed. For instance, in order for the group to kill a mob, one player must lure the mob towards the hunting group and then each player must coordinate their battle efforts to kill the mob. The battle is made up of these individual actions, such as casting damage spells on the mob, casting healing spells on fellow group members and having melee classes dole out physical damage with their weapons. In this context, the act of killing the mob would be considered a task and each swing and spell cast would be considered an action. In this example, attaining experience points for level advancement is the *goal* that is made up of an accumulation of tasks that result in a particular reward.

Level attainment is one of the most apparent goals designed into the game of EverQuest. Players enter the game world at level 1 (with a current level potential of 75 in the case of EverQuest) and have very little in terms of armour and weapons or spells. In order to upgrade their status, a player must gain more experience points. This is done

either by completing experience-based quests, where players are rewarded experience points for fulfilling a group of tasks, or by hunting non playing character monsters (or mobs as described above). With each level gained, the more of the game world is revealed, presenting more zones to explore, more quests to complete and more material rewards to gain. As players rise in levels, the challenges the game-world offers become increasingly difficult, requiring players to become part of stable groups such as guilds or of networks of independent players.

In conjunction with level attainment, another goal is the upgrading of a character's equipment. In order to gain levels, a character must be prepared to defeat the monsters that are designed for their appropriate level. Therefore, a character must wear armour that will protect them sufficiently, wield the weapons most effective against the mob they are confronting, as well as have the necessary level appropriate spells. A player can get better armour, weapons and spells from accomplishing smaller task sets, or by completing quests and raids. As a player acquires better equipment, they are then able to enter into riskier combat situations further enabling the player to progress in terms of experience points and strength, creating a potential forward moving progress loop. As a character progresses in terms of levels, the game design makes it necessary for players to cooperate to complete harder quests and so defeating high level mobs sometimes require as many as 50 actual playing characters. Each of those cooperating players must coordinate their actions by planning and strategizing the best course of action, as well as dealing with the political strategies necessary to defeat high level mobs. In essence, this means that a larger group of players must have the same goals in order to act as a unified front into battle. These raids and quests require advance preparation, which often require

the completion of smaller scale goals in order to accomplish the larger goal.

Therefore, actions, tasks and goals are interconnected play elements that create a patterned evolution of a playing character's identity formation between a player, their character and game space that they play in. Through the purposeful accumulation of actions which results in tasks, players make individual choices that often fulfill larger goals within the context of the game. The rewards of these goals become outside markers to other players. When a player enters a dangerous, high level dungeon, and reaps a reward such as a piece of armour specific to that location, or when a player wears that piece of armour, other players are able to identify that character as being of high level and potentially of a certain skill. This alters their social identity among members of their community.

Each pattern of play is made up of the same elements, but each pattern bears its own significance within the game through the individualized choices. Killing a grass snake at level one has the same accumulation of actions as the killing of a high level mob in an elite zone, but it is the links between the patterns that make each pattern unique to the player. In the case of a player who has no previous experience playing the game, killing the grass snake at level one is a learning experience as they work towards understanding the actions necessary to complete the task of killing the snake. As a player progresses through the game, they carry with them the accumulated knowledge gained through each play pattern, enabling them to hone their battle skills and refine their play strategy, which contributes to a player's social and personal identity within the game.

Responsibility & Commitment

As players negotiate the elements of play within the game, they are faced with

several layers of responsibility, including a responsibility to the game's design, to the player's avatar and to the other playing characters within the game space. Each layer of responsibility affects the player's ability to negotiate the individual elements of play. This in turn affects a character's identity within the server community as well as those individuals immediately surrounding the character in their day to day adventures such as guild mates and group members.

Addressing the player's *responsibility to the design of the game*, the player must adhere to certain elements that are coded within the game that the player cannot change. This game structure encompasses elements of the game that are out of the control of the playing character either by intentional game design or by social adaptation of circumstances within the game structure. These include physical limitations, such as not being able to run through walls or swim underwater without a breathing aid or flying through the air. These limitations exert a determining force on the player's actions and forces players to find alternate solutions to navigating through spaces such as canyons and oceans. Zone lines, mountains and transportation also pose limitations on a player's game actions affecting their ability to complete particular tasks and goals.

The design of level progression through the accumulation of experience points creates a linear sense of progression as a player can only move forward in gameplay. Whether it is through gaining levels or learning a secondary skill set such as tailoring or alchemy, the game is designed with a forward-moving progression model that the player must adhere to if they are to 'play' the game as it is designed. As mentioned earlier, the actions necessary to battle a mob are fundamentally the same at level one as they are at level 75. A player still must swing their sword or cast their spell, but it is through play

experience and level attainment that the patterns of play become more complex. At level one, a player has little experience to draw on, and a relatively small repertoire of spells or weapons to select from when attacking a mob. As the player's level and play experience increases, so does their arsenal, making play choices more difficult and more individualized.

A player also has a *responsibility to one's avatar*. Once a player selects what class they want to play during the character selection process, they must dedicate play time to the avatar's development; this includes the accumulation and increase in skill sets, experience points and armour class. In order to do this, a player must understand the role expectations and abilities of their particular class. This can be done through social channels within the game by meeting other players, perhaps ones that are higher level than themselves, and learning how to develop their class role in a mentoring situation. There are also many third party knowledge websites that players can visit when they are not in the game to learn about their character's class and the best strategies to advance their character professionally as well as socially.

By acknowledging the needs of a particular class, the player enters into a developmental relationship with their avatar. If a cleric needs a spell that is specific to their class or a shaman requires a particular potion then the player has a responsibility to acquire these items in order to maximize their purpose within the context of the game. Since EverQuest is known as being a very time consuming game, requiring many hours of play time to develop a character to high levels, most players only have time to focus on one main character. Although it is not uncommon for players to have secondary characters that serve different purposes, such as extra storage, leisurely exploration

sessions etc., their main responsibility often lies in the development and progression of their main character.

A player must also acknowledge their character's class ability limits. Although a cleric can technically engage in hand to hand combat, it is not within the game's design of the class to be able to live long enough in such combat as to be useful to a group, when a cleric's main role is to cast healing spells on their group members to keep their group alive. Although players can stretch these definitions by challenging the limits, there comes a point of failure that is inevitable. If a cleric decided to play the game as a fist-fighting fiend, he may find himself alienated when looking for a group to quest with, since this type of cleric is not the most desirable when aiming to hunt for experience points. So, while it is possible to play a class role outside of the designed construct, collective understanding of the role of a cleric often prevails.

Finally, a playing character has a *responsibility to the other players* within their server community. At the very least, a playing character owes it to the other players to understand the role that have chosen to play if they choose to play the game in groups. When a player is accepted to play among a group for the first time, it is usually understood that the player has a basic understanding of the role they are expected to fulfill specific to their class. A cleric should be able to be relied upon when a group member needs healing during a battle. If a player does not play their class to their character's capacity, social norms dictate that that player will not be re-invited into their group, as other players will often make a note to avoid that particular player in the future.

It should be understood that if a player chooses to play outside the construct of social norms as demonstrated above in the fist-fighting cleric, or by choosing to 'grief

play' (Warner & Raiter, 2005), loosely defined as destructive or selfish play tactics, then the player must accept the social stigmas attached to such behaviour within a structurally cooperative game world. By ignoring the responsibility to other playing characters, the players accept the consequences and risks the chance of being left out of larger goals of the game as such as raids, quests etc.

Through a sense of responsibility, commitment becomes an essential element in the process of identity construction. The more an individual is committed to a role or relationship, the more meaning it develops. This follows traditional social-psychological identity theory concerning identity commitment (Burke, 2003; Ellemers, Spears & Doojse, 1999; Stryker & Serpe, 1994). The more responsibility a player feels, the more apt they are to be committed to developing the identity. On an external level, as a player constructs and maintains their identity by committing to the playing of one particular avatar; they develop a more established place within the larger structure of roles within the game. If a player commits to one avatar, say – a cleric – through playing with other players, fulfilling their role or function within group and raid settings, the player establishes an identity within the community as a player, and as their avatar. The more time a player dedicates to one particular avatar, the more meaning is invested into its identity, and one could hazard the assumption that with the increase in commitment, so increases the level of responsibility. Through the increase of meaning, the level of commitment increases. As iterated by Burke (2003) “The increased ties in the larger network of others should increase the level of commitment to the shared meanings and hence the identities that share those meanings” (p. 202).

Commitment arises through each pattern of play, in that as a player repeats and

increases the amount of patterns, they become familiar with the play elements specific to the class role and character they are playing. As a player weaves patterns over time, creating distinctive patterns of play, their role and their behavioral characteristics become embedded in the larger network of players. It is in this manner that players experience internal (personal) and external (social) commitment. Much like the responsibility a player feels towards their character as well as to others, players become committed to their character as well as to their social group within the game. This sense of commitment develops in several different ways that distinguishes it from the feeling of responsibility. The primary difference between the two is that responsibility is driven by a sense of obligation, while commitment is driven by a sense of ambition. The difference is obvious when looking at how the two manifest themselves within the construct of the game and through individualized gameplay.

When I first started playing EverQuest, I was inundated with the feelings of responsibility. I would wander around the starting town of Halas, unsure of my actions, and still a little shy to ask a question in the open public channels. Every time I would approach a mob, I would spend the first few seconds looking around to make sure that someone else had not already cast on it. I knew from my first few days in the game that it was rude to cast or hit a mob that someone else had already claimed, unfortunately, I would often start the attack with half my hit points as the mob wailed on me while I was contemplating ownership. Sadly, not everyone felt the same sense of responsibility towards their fellow players as I remember losing many mobs to other players who decided to attack the mob that I stood in front of, knowing that I had already attacked it, usually an unspoken signal of mob ownership. As I gained more experience, I learned

how to click on a mob to see it had any damage on it already, if not, I knew that no one else had attacked it and promptly cast my root spell to hold it in place while I prepared my plan of action. Eventually, I learned that I had a responsibility to the other players around me to know how to play the game, if not I could be subject to many publicly voiced insults, and be excluded from future hunting groups. Once I learned the expectations of the players around me, whether I was in a group with them or simply playing in the vicinity of other players, I realized that I had to commit my time and efforts to making my character and my play better. I had to be committed to being able to hold my own in a battle situation and not rely on strangers to help me out when I was flailing.

From the point that I realized the difference between responsibility and commitment, it became embedded into my gameplay through the desire to maintain the connection to the community and individual players that had taken the time to teach me some of the ropes of my class. As other players began to count on me, I realized that I had to decide what type of player I wanted to be. This impacted my decisions within the game such as what groups I would join, what quests I would complete – these decisions were made with a goal in mind – to become a better shaman. As the social responsibility increased, so did the level of focused commitment.

Another element that has the potential to instill a sense of commitment within the players is the physical (actual) time it takes to gain levels within the game of EverQuest. At the time of EverQuest's release in 1999, it could take at least a year or so to attain the maximum level of 50 as a casual to semi-serious player; it has since been augmented through several expansion packs to level 75. Hardcore players, individuals who spent as

much time as possible in the game world and who strove towards being the best through the most efficient means possible, were often higher level faster. Nonetheless, this demographic remains a relative minority within the player community. As it took so much time for one character to become high level, players were required to concentrate on one avatar in order to reach the 'end game', or simply, the high level quests and battles designed specifically for players who have reached the maximum level in the game. By spending so much time with one character, identity commitment was strong. Also, since it took so much time to level one character, those who I played with often played only one avatar – or at least one character seriously at a time, and alternative avatars were rarely committed to as rigidly as they were to their 'main'. Eventually, this commitment and sense of responsibility changed the reasons behind why people played the game (Yee, 2005).

One of the most common things players mentioned to me during my playtime and research was how they felt they 'had' to play a particular character. From guild responsibilities if the player was a guild officer, or held another position within the guild to feeling like they had to log in to play if they knew that a group needed a particular class in order to play. Players also often felt a responsibility to log for the sake of their avatar. This was most evident during the 'grind' period, when players were still working towards hitting the maximum level in the game. The idea that they had to 'finish' their levelling was common – and not always towards a purely functional ends such as being needed by their guild to be a certain level. One player told me that they felt bad that their avatar was trailing behind in terms since they only had so much time to play during the

week. He felt bad that his real life friends⁸ had surpassed them in levels and that they could no longer play together for experience points. Also, he mentioned feeling a bit embarrassed that other players, who had come into the game later than him were already passing him by. At this point, he began to feel bad not only for his own play experience, but for his avatar too. He explained it to me during one of our late night conversations while playing;

...it was like I could never play with the guys anymore, after a while, no one bothered to ask me to join 'em... I hated being left out and not getting to play with the guys – it was weird, I hated the fact that my monk wasn't getting to play with his friends either – I mean, its like they were all going off and doing cool things and my guy just had to keep killing bears out in the field... at first, I would get frustrated and just log off and play another character – but after a while, I hated feeling left out so much that I knew I had to spend more time playing my monk – so that he could join the others.

The sense of commitment can last longer than the player's interest in the game, as many players feel the need to continue paying for their account even after they've stopped playing the game, myself included. Often, I have felt that by paying for the account, Velixious lived. She remained stored in the game server's database, ready for me to log in at any time. She remains part of the game, the community, even if she hasn't

⁸ Many players come to the game because they knew other people in their everyday lives who played the game – when referring to “real life friends” I am referring to people the player knew prior to entering the gameworld.

come out to play in years. Although I am no longer committed to her development, I still feel that her identity is so intricately interwoven with my own and deserves to have the account kept open for her as much as for myself.

Summary

Through the progression of levels, a player develops a large quantity of play patterns that on the surface, appear to be the same pattern repeated over and over (aim, click, attack) but each encounter is unique in the details – different mob, different environment, different group dynamics and different play choices presented to the player. As player experience increases, they have a larger body of patterned play to draw upon, creating links between patterns that develop into unique identity forming play elements. Whether by choosing a different geographical path to complete a particular task or by choosing to work in a group instead of completing the task solo, these decisions during gameplay create individualized play patterns that impact a player's personal and social identity.

By adding the implication of responsibility and commitment, the player's choices are further complicated by the social and structural elements of game play, increasing the potential for identity construction and maintenance. Players are confronted with learning play etiquette and role expectations that are constructed through interactions with other players. The intermeshing of play patterns, commitment and the acknowledgement of responsibility leads to the "stability" of a character's identity both internally and externally.

Social Play by Design

As mentioned above, each playable class serves a functional role within the overall structure of the goal oriented play. Indeed, complimentary class combinations are necessary for successful character advancement within the game, but once individual player personality and social interaction is introduced, the definitional boundaries of these functional roles are altered. Drawing on personal play experience, formal participant observation sessions and a canvassing of third-party game related information sites, this chapter aims to look at the structural similarities between class roles designed into the game and traditional sociological role theory. If we look at class roles through this theoretical framework, we can see how socialization and collective norms influences the performance and expectations of roles played within the game.

To begin to explore the socialization of roles within the game, we turn to a classic role theorist, Turner (1952) as he defines the function of roles within an interactive group environment, stating that:

Every position that continues to be recognized by the members of a group contributes in some way to the purposes of the group; this contribution represents its *function*. Associated with every position is a body of common beliefs concerning its function; these beliefs represent one part of the groups system of norms. The functions of a position, as understood by group members who recognize it, do not necessarily correspond to its functions as they would be seen by an outsider... (p. 325)

When thinking about class roles in EverQuest, we can divide Turner's definition of role function into three distinct categories; design, expectations and socialization: **design** through the idea that one's "contribution represents its *function*", which is often structurally predetermined; **expectations**, which are created through "a body of common beliefs concerning its function" in which "represent one part of the groups system of norms". Finally, **actualization** through functional and social interaction, "the functions of a position, as understood by group members who recognize it, do not necessarily correspond to its functions as they would be seen by an outsider"

To look at Turner's functional role system in terms of class roles in EverQuest, we can start with a player's point of entry into the game. When a player selects a class to play, the un-socialized, unequipped character can be thought of as being in a pure state of its basic, predetermined, functioning role. At this early stage, the role carries only its own fundamental defining characteristics⁹ separate from any of collective ideal or individualization. If a player chooses to play a cleric, the initial character they create has the minimal definitional characteristics that all starting clerics have, that it is that they are a healing class; that clerics are only one of two pure casters classes and they can wear plate armour to name but a few basic class defining characteristics. Through the individualized play patterns and social interaction, the cleric as a class role becomes infused with collective meaning and expectations.

Once the player enters the social space of the game world, the designed role begins to be redefined through a collective ideal – or shared 'norms' of what the functional role of a particular class should be. These are the 'norms' that are created

⁹ <http://eq.crgaming.com/creationguides/Cleric.asp>

through social interaction of a particular community and can be paralleled with Turner's above-mentioned expectations that occur through functional group interaction. Finally, through personal expectations of the game, personality type of the player and individual game experiences – among many other defining elements, a player appropriates the role of their class, making them distinct from other players of the same class.

Through this framework, we can look at how the role development in gameplay flows through three phases; its designed elements, the collective ideals that shapes the role further and finally, the individualized role that is created through the personality of the individual player. The contrast between the fixed role of a class and the collective understanding of what the role should be can be defined as the *line of differentiation* between the designed and played – or socialized – roles.

Designed Roles

Within the structural design of the game, each class is created in functional relation to other playable classes within the game. Most groups are made up of a healing class, often a cleric, paladin or shaman; a fighting class, such as a warrior, shadow-knight or monk, and a magic casting class such as an enchanter, wizard or necromancer. By playing these roles in combination, players can work towards fulfilling play patterns that are required to complete common game goals such as quests and hunting raids. Each class role is essentially designed as an individual part to a larger functional whole. This designed structure is very similar to the bureaucratic structure defined by traditional role theory.

Merton (1957) describes the bureaucratic system as one where “every series of actions is functionally related to the purposes of the organization” (p. 249). We can relate

group goals to those of an organization. Groups and guilds, grinds and raids, these are all structures that are functionally related. According to Turner (1952), the characteristics of an entity within a group must have some degree of stability. In terms of EverQuest, game design creates the stability necessary by carefully detailing the functional boundaries of each class's role that a player can choose.

In considering the role of a cleric within the game and goals of EverQuest, the stability of the role lies within its actions. The game's official website defines the role of clerics as follows:

Clerics gain powerful healing and enhancement spells, greatly increasing the health and defences of their group, while keeping them healed in the most dangerous battles. While other priest classes have healing spells, no one can match up with the power and efficiency of clerical healing.

...

With a few exceptions, clerics are dependent on being part of a group. But they are highly desirable group members.¹⁰

Although somewhat ambiguous, this statement reveals that a cleric's role within the structure of the game is essentially to heal others. There are many other detailing elements that define a cleric – from the limited type of armour a cleric can wear, to the limited races that can fulfill the role within the game, but based on generalized overview of what role a cleric is in the scope of the game, a player knows that to be a cleric is to

¹⁰ <http://eqlive.station.sony.com/library/classes.jsp>

heal other playing characters.

From a structural perspective, both Merton (1957) and Turner (1952) acknowledge that although individuals fulfill the roles in the group or organization, the individuals can be replaced while the roles remain intact. In EverQuest, the design is what defines the group. Since the game is designed with group play as its focus, it could be said that the design is primarily concerned with the whole (class) instead of the individual (player). A cleric remains a cleric in its definitional sense regardless of the individual playing the role. Functionally, any cleric will suffice in a group as long as it fulfills its healing role. As Turner (1952) reminds us, “These role relationships are pretty much the same in any (group) regardless of the individual personalities of the members.” (p. 323)

Merton (1957) further explains the bureaucratic system beyond the individual by stating, “Official action ordinarily occurs within the framework of pre-existing rules of the organization” (p. 249). A successful group in EverQuest works within the idea of this predetermined framework where the primary purposive action between members is enabled through the fulfillment of one’s role. Aside from purely social interaction, the initial purpose of interaction within the game of EverQuest is a functional one in that the players primarily unite together to fulfill game goals based on their class roles.

The group structure that is designed into the game demonstrates the bureaucratic system defined by traditional role theory. Defined by the official EverQuest website, “groups are temporary groupings ... which allow an ongoing affiliation between players.”¹¹ In more descriptive terms, the purpose of a group in EverQuest can be defined

¹¹ <http://eqlive.station.sony.com/manual/manual.jsp?id=46846>

as a combination of playing characters, usually up to 6 players, that assemble to fulfill short term goals in gathering in-game money, experience points or questing. Although each class has the capacity to play the game alone to some extent, the purpose of the role is a functional and inevitably a social one since each class role was designed to be at its most functional in combination with other classes. This type of game design instils a sense of collective action (Smith, 2005) that is necessary among all players at some point in their gameplay experience for the ‘greater good’ of the fulfillment of goals. With the lure of greater rewards when hunting in a group, even the most selfish of players often opt for group play, maximizing their functional potential.

In describing to players how to create a group or hunting ‘party’, the website states:

When starting a party, consider the skills of each member that you invite. You want a good mixture of combat, spell-casting and healing abilities. At the very least, make sure you have a couple of strong fighters, a wizard, magician, necromancer or enchanter to cast spells, and someone else with healing powers (like a cleric).¹²

This is a basic explanation of what a good group should look like according to Sony (EQLive). It should be noted that this explanation is intended for novice players, in this sense; the explanation potentially shapes the novice player’s perception of what a “good group” is. This creates the beginning of role expectations among players.

As one long term player put it, “warrior, cleric, enchanter are really the only

¹² ibid

'needed' classes - all other classes are support". But in reality, depending on the particular game goals and tasks a player embarks on, aside from intense, high level raids, a group does not NEED a cleric; they need some sort of healing power. A group does not NEED a warrior, but some sort of muscle to diminish their enemies' hit points. These role choices become a personalized issue based on gameplay style. Some players even pride themselves in being able to play the game outside the structural 'norms'. Even though some players believe that a group cannot function without a cleric, or secondary healing support class, other see it as a challenge and opt to play the game without a healing class, relying on things such as healing potions created by shaman, and bandaging skills; a skill that all players have the option to develop.

In creative gameplay, it is possible to make do with two lesser healers instead of one pure healer, but then it takes the slot of an extra player, taking away the opportunity to have the "perfect group". Returning to the official definition of a group as being an 'affiliation between players', it can be understood that these 'affiliations' are based on a player's understanding of a class' role due to functional expectations of a class' norms.

Social Norms & Roles

Expectations in terms of sociological role theory are the collective norms that surround a functional role. These expectations bridge the social and the functional in that the norms are created through formal role definitions and personal experience of interaction with the role found in gameplay.

Although based on the defined (or designed) role, expectations are also based on players' role performances and further formulated through a collective belief system of the boundaries and limits. Parsons (1959) describes role expectations as being "a value

pattern” that “is always institutionalized in an *interaction* context”, making these expectations a social construct.

Parsons states that “there are the expectations which concern and in part set standards for the behaviour of the actor who is taken as the point of reference; these are his ‘role expectations’ ... from his point of view there is a set of expectations relative to the contingently probable *reactions* of others ...” (p. 38). In other words, when a player acts toward fulfilling their functional role, there are social elements they must consider surrounding not only the functional role of the class, but also socially constructed expectations that surround the execution of the role. In order to do this successfully, a player must consider what others expect out of that role when deciding how to play. This will inevitably affect the performance of the functional role by forcing the player to create a balance between designed function, socially constructed expectations, and the actualized performance of one’s role.

In this sense then, Parsons claims that “a role then is a sector of the total orientation system of an individual actor which is organized about expectations in relation to a particular interaction context, that is integrated with a particular set of value-standards which govern interaction with one or more alters in the appropriate complementary roles” (p. 39). It is through these ‘value-standards’ that role hierarchies are further perpetuated, through the collective ideal of the importance of one role over another in a group situation within the game. As other players deem the cleric a necessary class within their group, their role value will increase, creating a social hierarchy attached to the functional role.

When considering the role of cleric in EverQuest, a player can learn the role-

expectations through social interaction but also through third party knowledge web sites. This is what makes the game world interesting in comparison to other structured social systems. These websites are compiled with information about what makes a 'good' cleric, with tips and tricks, hints and guides for a player to better themselves within the game-space. Although most role expectations are based on a particular social context of the individual fulfilling the role, the third party knowledge sites are usually removed from the actual, individualized gameplay experience, altering the direct reciprocal nature of the creation of role expectations through the collective norms of a particular community.

Finally, Parsons acknowledges that no matter how rigidly defined any functional role is, the personality of the individual fulfilling the role plays a large part in how the role is actualized. He states that "given the initial diversity of genetic constitution, plus the diversity of situational influence, including the combination or role-interactions, it would be strictly impossible for socialization, even in a relatively uniform milieu, in terms of major differentiations of social structure, to produce a strictly uniform product" (p. 230). This brings us to agency within a structured role and how an individual takes the same functional role as many others and makes it their own.

Played Roles

As a player enters the world of EverQuest, they are given a selection of generic roles to choose from, among them the role of cleric. A cleric's role is to heal, but beyond a role's generic design and pure function, the actualization of the role is influenced by the player's personality, expectations of the role prior to entering the game, socialized in-game expectations and finally through a player's social interaction with other playing characters within the game. This creates a player's personal style of play which defines

the level of role fulfillment in terms of role expectations and collective ideals of a particular class' capabilities.

As a player puts more time into playing their character, learning the role of their class and interacting with other individuals, the roles are further personalized beyond their original definitions and visual characteristics chosen in the beginning. Other defining elements enter the player's definition of the role they are fulfilling (through play) such as trade-skills, social status and individual player motivations for selecting a particular class and how a player sees that class being played prior to entering the game. This personalization of the role makes it difficult to view the role as simply a functional one when looking for members to complete a goal oriented group within the game. It is in this stage that the community begins to distinguish between a good cleric and a bad cleric, even if both roles are capable of fulfilling the same tasks.

As mentioned earlier, a cleric's role is to heal their group members during battle, and cast spells that increase their group mates' health and other in game characteristics. Through interaction, players begin to develop an understanding the difference between a sufficient, functional cleric and an excellent one. A player who fulfills their role beyond expectations of other players can be qualified as an excellent cleric. This skill level is developed by the player through time and commitment to the development of their class role, play experience, and additional textual knowledge of one's role – often found on websites and message boards.

“What distinguishes one group from others is its members' behaviour, and not just who its members are – that is, their names, faces, and personal idiosyncrasies” (Turner, 1952). Through repeated interaction with the same people, role expectations

change based on personal play style of those being interacted with. Through this type of socialization, what was once deemed a 'generalized' norm now becomes 'specialized'. A tight or highly effective group will become accustomed to such instinctual role fulfillment and begin to expect such performance from other players they encounter.

In this reciprocal fashion, expectations become redefined, clarified and reified based on the expectations of a small group instead of a larger system. This separates players within the society found within the game-space, differentiating good guilds and bad, a great group from a functional one and a great player from a slacker. Depending on what others expect of the classes and players they associate with, each role is transformed beyond the generic class the player started out with. It is in this sense that individual visual attributes such as race and gender, become ways to attach individual players to functional roles.

There are other ways a player can elaborate on the role definition of their particular class. The player who plays more than one character (of a different class) can indeed define themselves as more than just a cleric, or just a warrior – but as a unique hybrid of both, since the player will accumulate knowledge from one character that may potentially affect their definition of self when playing another character.

Fulfilling multiple roles within the same game-space allows a player to understand the functions of different roles within the same social system. This gives a player a stronger sense of what is required of their other role within the game. A player who has both a high-level warrior and a high-level cleric can then use information they have learned about a particular tactic or zone when playing one character and use this information to benefit the second character. This expands the played attributes of the

fixed, designed role of any particular class beyond its confined, defining characteristics.

Summary

With these three structural definitions in place; functional design which is understood as being the rules of play or boundaries of the generic class role within the game; role expectations which are created through socialization between players; and role actualization as player's individualize their role through play choices, personality and play style, we see that the game is designed as a set of roles intended to be played together, but the play experience is affected by the individuals who perform these roles, altering the boundaries of the set (designed) roles.

Furthermore, the unique environment of the game-space found within MMOGs such as EverQuest, allows individuals to participate in and observe structural functionalist systems such as groups, guilds, and raids simultaneously. Play through an avatar has the ability to remove the player, to some degree, from the first person perspective of participation within a structural system, allowing them to potentially explore the theoretical elements of role theory. Such an environment allows us to re-examine the position of sociological role theory in terms of traditional social structures and system in a new and evolving virtual context while understanding the role of identity construction within the structural and social construct of the game.

The Process of Identity

Identity is part of a whole process of interactions. What began as the point of entry into the game, the player's character creation lays the foundation for the process of identity construction and maintenance within the game space. The initial character becomes altered through gameplay, social interactions, and the accumulation of material goods such as armour and weaponry, but the fundamental elements such as gender, race and class remain the same. Once inside the game, the player is confronted with learning to negotiate the play process through the performance of actions, tasks and goals, creating play patterns that influence their in-game social and personal identity. As the player progresses within the game, they develop a sense of responsibility to the game's structure, their character and the other players. This sense of responsibility coupled with individualized patterns of play contributes to the construction and maintenance of identity.

Players develop their identity through the roles that they fulfill within the context of the game. Demonstrated herein through traditional sociological role theory, identity is also developed through understanding a player's role as it is designed into the game, as it is collectively constructed, developing social norms and through individual player choices. These three facets of identity construction remain in a constant state of development as the player negotiates their relationship with their avatar, the game space and other players.

The goal of this final chapter is to move beyond the idea that online interactions are therapeutic, escapist, or fragmented events that occur outside of the reality of the user or player (Turkle, 1995). It is important to understand that the interactions that occur

within the game space are an integral part of a player's identity which is grounded in both physical and virtual reality, since the identity constructed and maintained in the game stems from the player. As Burke (2003) writes "...having multiple identities also creates a nexus of those identities that are affected by the fact that a single individual holds them" (p. 200). This challenges Turkle's (1995) idea that one's online self is fragmented and removed from their physical selves. Instead of thinking of online identities as separate entities, removed from the individual's reality, it is important to look at "...questions of how multiple identities relate to each other, how they are switched on or off, and, when they are on, how the person manages to maintain congruence between perceptions and standards for each identity" (Burke, 2003; p. 196).

In viewing on and offline identities as a system of interlocking aspects of self, understanding how these identities relate and interact with each other is important in defining the process of identity construction and maintenance in goal oriented digital worlds like those of MMOG's. According to Burke (2003), multiple identities exist within every individual from both an internal (personal identity) and external (social/role identity) perspective and "events and conditions that affect the individual have the capacity to affect all the identities held by that individual" (p. 200). Within Burke's process, each event activates multiple identities that share common elements. Once activated, each identity is verified against each other within a hierarchy based on shared commonalities and meaning. Identities that have less commonly shared elements are at the bottom of the hierarchy, and those with more meanings in common are at the top. However, all levels of identity still play a role in every event. According to Burke, "...lower-level identities might represent multiple identities that have been activated in a

situation, each of which is acting to control relevant perceptions by altering behavior in the situation” (p. 197). This interaction between identities provides “...guidance for our perceptions and behaviors” (p. 201), which also alters the standards for each active identity.

In MMOGs, a player internalizes multiple identities, whether it is through the fulfillment of their class role within the larger community structure, the negotiation of inter-personal relationships or as they head or assist in the leadership of guilds and organize battle groups. Players take on identities of bankers and craftsmen as well as warriors and friends. Each of these identities exist within a hierarchy based on commonalities and meanings, and these identities are drawn on as players negotiate patterns of play, social interactions and role expectations. These negotiations are part of what Burke considers to be the external foci of identity; elements that are links between social structure and the individual.

There is also an intricate web of negotiations that occur between the player and their avatar. Occurring between the player and the game environment, there exists a negotiation a static, predetermined yet abstract physical environment and between the player’s avatar and other players’ avatars. These negotiations occur internally as they are concerned with “issues of how the multiple identities that an individual has function together within the self” (p. 196). In terms of one’s identity within the game, for some, the goal is to develop a refined congruent version of self both as a player and as an avatar.

Relationships & Identity

Encompassed within the boundaries of character creation, play patterns and role identity, and driven by responsibility and commitment, the player has several other relationships to deal with that influence their internal and external identity. The extent to which these factors influence identity is conditional upon the type of player. This means that those who do not play a social game will inevitably be less influenced by social interactions, whereas those who play a more efficient and competitive game may be more influenced by their role definition. Over the course of 5 years, Velixious remained my only high level character. I was a social player, who dedicated a lot of time to developing my character both socially and functionally. The intricacies of my relationship with her are what prompted my work on identity in MMOGs. I wanted to understand the path through which I came to regard Velixious as something bigger than myself; someone with her own history, her own narrative within her own world. I knew that at the base, I was the player who navigated her through this world, but there appeared to be more to Velixious than just the pure representation of myself within a space of play. Through her, I came to see that there was more to identity construction and maintenance than the selections made in the character select screen, the decisions made during gameplay, and the role that I played during battle. Within these three primarily structural elements, there appeared to be four other parallel levels of relative interaction going on; the player/avatar relationship; the player/environment relationship; avatar/avatar relationship and finally, the player/player relationship. Each of these levels of interaction often occurs simultaneously with one's role identity and play patterns. In an attempt to understand these additional player relationships, I had to look towards my own play experience.

Player / Avatar Relationship

When I made Velixious, I took the time to make her look as close to my physical self as possible (if I were a Barbarian that is) but I never really thought about what our relationship would be beyond her as a vehicle of play. When I would log in during the early days, up until about level 20, I saw Velixious as my visual representation within the world of EverQuest; I saw her as a beautiful pixelated version of my barbarian self. My social interactions came from my point of view, not from the point of view of a barbarian shaman that had her own narrative history as part of a race rich with lore. Over time, however, I realized that there was a unique relationship between her and myself. I realized that her narrative blended with mine and that I had to respect her as someone outside of myself.

All characters begin their lives in EverQuest with a few basics: a rusty weapon; five water; five muffins; and some minimal clothing. Other than acquiring levels, the early goals of the game include skill points, basic armour, spells and a few weapons. During the first few levels, I found it easy to cycle through armour and weapons quite quickly, never really getting attached to any one item or to an overall aesthetic look, and gaining levels was relatively quick. With each mob that I killed, there was usually an item on its corpse that I could either equip or sell for a small profit later, when I ventured back to the village. At the time, everything seemed disposable.

It was easy to get caught up in the speed of success in the first few levels, changing equipment often, meeting many new faces in the starting areas, never really getting attached to anything or anyone. It drew me into the game. It brought me to a point where I felt that I had put in a fair amount of effort towards accomplishing something. It

became difficult to just stop playing, because I knew that there was still so much more to do, so many more places to visit, battles to be won and treasures to be found. The fast pace of the first part of the game is deceptive and attractive.

This soon changed. As I hit level 20, the 'grind' began, and the intervals between hearing the distinctive 'ding' sound when you go up a level slowed down. Since I was no longer levelling up so quickly, I had to wear the same piece of armour, a breastplate, for what seemed like eons worth of levels. The money was harder to come by as the mobs I killed dropped less valuable items and costs of spells and other needs such as food and water increased. Despite this slow down in progress, it allowed for me to spend more time with familiar people. During my play time, most players went to the same zone during the same level spans. The desert of Oasis was the first place I remember making real friends in the game; people that were added to my friend list, which made it possible to see when they were online, and get together to group together. Through this type of bonding, Velixious began to get a reputation among others in the same level range. This allowed me to expand my social sphere and my gameplay experience.

As I became more and more familiar with other players, spending more time in groups with people that I knew, I felt a new sense of pride when we finished killing a particularly difficult mob. I am familiar with feeling pride, but with Velixious, it was different. It was a feeling of pride that existed almost outside of myself. When other players would compliment me for being on top of things, pulling the group out impossible situations, what I felt was more the glowing pride of a parent rather than the personal pride of accomplishment. With this shift in acknowledgement, I started to feel that I had to develop Velixious not only for my own play experience, but because she

needed to move forward. I felt as if she had to progress within her world, her own narrative and be important outside of my own navigational guidance and personal play. I realized that the choices that I made reflected not only on me as a player, but on Velixious as a Shaman in the mystical world of EverQuest. The meanings that were created through the play patterns were shared meanings, not between myself and other players but between myself and Velixious, the Barbarian Shaman with whom I spent many hours a week.

Through time and commitment over the next thirty levels, the bond between Velixious and I strengthened, often to the point that I would feel guilty if I were to log on to any other character. I had the feeling that I was neglecting her and even stunting her growth and development. Social ties were broken as my play time waned. When I did log in, I felt frustration because I had become a player whose community was no longer there. That frustration was not limited to my own social-play needs, but was instead directed towards the fact that Velixious had lost some of her lustre. She was no longer as strong as she used to be. Through my neglect as a player, she had lost companions that were made along the way, her armour had aged and her weapons were no longer as dangerous as they once were. However, what remains is her place in the narrative of the game. Her history coincides with the history of other players, other characters. She stands alone in the old screenshots among her other pixelated friends. These old screenshots do not show me, the player, sitting in front of a computer, clicking away, and frantically typing battle cries. These pictures show her history – not mine, even if I had helped her make it.

Independence

It is undisputable that if it were not for a player creating the avatar, there would be no character within the game. Through the playing and development of an avatar, they become a character within the game; a known fixture within the game environment. This type of identity manifests during the interactions between avatars. Often, players do not divulge their 'real' information to every group and raid member. Therefore, the other players recognize the cleric they are grouped with through their name, in-game physical characteristics, armour, role performance, and behaviour.

This is most significantly demonstrated when the avatar is controlled by a player other than avatar's owner. Whether the character is being used by a guild-mate or the account has been sold, other players recognize that particular avatar in its game world context. Although all clerics can heal, and all warriors can fight, each particular cleric or warrior has distinguishing identity markers created through individualized play patterns, social interactions with others as well as with the game environment. It is true that these behavioural characteristics were originally imbued by the player, but multiple people can play one avatar and remain consistent in maintaining the avatars in-game identity. This is not mean that the character's identity cannot be marred or altered by inexperienced players logging into a veteran account. If the player is unfamiliar with the role or personality of the avatar, any straying from the socially shared ideal of that character leads to suspicion and can cause anger among the community if others were not informed of the changes in play ahead of time.

Yet, in many ways, we can relate the developed role of the avatar to a character in a movie or theatrical piece. The characters exist within the narrative independent of their

actors. In as much the same way that a character such as Ian Fleming's James Bond has a particularly penned personality and specific attributes, he can be played by different actors. There are core elements that make James Bond who he is, which were delineated in his original creation, but each actor can bring him to life. The difference between a film character and a developed avatar within an MMOG is that the author is the creator who is often, but not always the actor. In this sense, the 'avatar' can be played by others while still presenting the created character seen in the avatar's name and design.

Player / Environment Relationship

Within the theoretical frame of symbolic interactionism, the spatial interaction an individual has with their physical world acts as markers of identity construction (McCarthy, 1984). Elaborating on the ideas of G.H. Mead, McCarthy describes the treatment of physical objects as part of a function of defining the "bodily self". He regards the physical ability of touching and grasping objects in one's physical world as an integral part in "reality construction" and "reality-maintenance" (p. 105). In the case of an MMOG, the player must negotiate the abstract spatiality of the objects found within the game world through another abstract entity of their avatar. The physicality of the virtual world is undisputable – an avatar cannot walk through walls, dies when they fall off of cliffs and can eat, drink; pick up and equip certain items while not others. In this way, the avatar becomes defined through their interaction with the coded physical objects in the game world. Players must learn how to navigate based on the avatar's physical world and not their own terrestrial one.

This is a difficult task. Learning how to do something in the abstract virtual space of an MMOG does not necessarily follow the same rules as the task would in everyday

'physical' reality. For example, in my own life, I know how to mount a horse. I know how to grab the horses bridle, put my foot firmly in the stir-up and hoist my body upwards as I swing my leg over the horses back to the other side. Mounting a horse in EverQuest, is not the same: I must make the connection between what buttons I need to press on my keyboard and/or mouse to make my avatar perform the necessary actions within the game world (Giddings, 2005; Gregersen, 2005). Determining the physical proximity between Velixious and said horse for the mount is, at first, difficult because it is not based the same concept of perceived distance, but on the coded distance. Once I determine how close Velixious has to be to mount the horse, and I figure out what button to click, she almost miraculously flies to the top of the horse in a seated position. No laborious swinging of the leg, no weak footholds that cause her to slip and fall off – either I was close enough to the horse and have clicked the right button or I did not.

In order for Velixious to mount the horse, she had to activate the horse-mounting sequence coded into the game environment. Without the ability to physical stretch out and touch the objects within the game, I had to use the boundaries of Velixious' body to determine the boundaries of the other objects in the game-world. So, although there is no physical touching and grasping, there is still a 'collusion' (Giddings, 2005) between game objects, defining the abstract physical boundaries between objects. What makes this task difficult at times is that the game's design can leave room for visual errors (an avatar standing a foot off the cliff, seemingly standing in mid air) or being able to walk through a tree, even though theoretically it is supposed to be a solid object. This relates to the previous section herein on responsibility. Once a player determines their abstract physicality, they have a responsibility to the game, and its successful play, in order to be

able to acknowledge and respect the coded physicality. As a player develops an understanding of the player/environment relationship, their identity within the game space broadens. Through their ability to perform within certain environmental confines, a player is able to challenge these same confines, distinguishing their gameplay from others.

Avatar / Avatar Relationship

Within the abstract physical world of EverQuest, avatars must negotiate their interactions with other avatars (Taylor, 2003). Admittedly, most avatars are controlled by players, except in the case of non-playing characters (NPCs). As each avatar carves its place and identity within the virtual world, they develop into characters.

Two avatars cannot technically occupy the same physical space. Thus, through their avatar, the player must negotiate their relationship with other avatars in terms of their physicality, as well through their other identities – their roles, aesthetic characteristics such as race and armour and their social identity. Regardless of the players on the other side of the avatars navigating their avatars physical movements, the avatars have a relationship that is unique to the game-space.

As a young player (again, in terms of levels), I never quite fully understood the avatar / avatar dynamic. It was only as I started to group with other players regularly that I understood how important my physical understanding of the game space and the other active avatars within it were. Learning how to group with other players meant more than just knowing how to accept a group invitation and all attack the same mob at the same time; although, in the beginning this also proved to be a challenge. I had to learn how to position Velicious specific to her role in that particular battle, and specific to the other

roles of the other avatars that were in my group. Different mobs have different radiuses of aggression, obligating the players to learn how close they can approach a mob before being attacked. There are many unwritten rules of play that are only uncovered through play experience with other players. If a player is casting a damage spell on the mob, they have to be careful how much damage they are causing so they do not call too much attention to themselves. When playing with fighting classes, the caster must know how much they can cast, how much “agro” (the level of aggression the monster feels towards the player) they will cause and how the other avatars around them are able to deal with potential errors in judgement and play mistakes.

I learned the hard way, in what was perhaps the only way. On one of our guild’s most challenging adventures, we were attempting to kill a parade of dragons with a minimal amount of players. Some of our guild leaders had spent many hours researching how to successfully take down the quickly re-spawning dragons with half the number of players the mission usually called for. For it to be successful, positioning was of the utmost importance. My role, as a shaman, was to cast a spell on the mob that lowered its attack speed. In order to be successful, I had to time my casting with the casting of a spell that lowered the dragon’s resistance to magic by another guild-mate. We also had to be a certain distance away from each other, and a certain distance away from the dragon. A difficult task because we were in a small room inside a large temple. As a player, I had to understand my avatar’s positional and functional relationship to the other avatars around me. On our first attempt, I did not quite understand where I was supposed to be standing, so I simply backed up a bit more, perhaps three or four steps back. Unfortunately, there were other mobs behind our hunting area, and it caused a rampage of dragons to bear

down on us and wreak havoc. Death was imminent. It took us almost an hour (in 'real' time) to recover from that simple mistake. It was then that I realized that not only did I have a specific relationship to my character, but that I had to understand how she related to others within the game space.

The relationship between avatars exists both functionally and physically. It exists functionally through understanding the potential combination of roles in any particular situation. Physically, it manifests through an understanding of the physical distance and proximity required to perform certain actions such as cast protective spells or initiate a trade between avatars. These relationships outline another potential boundary within any particular pattern of play sequence.

Player / Player Relationship

Player – player relationships occur on many levels in countless situations within the game, as well as outside the game through third party websites such as guild sites, information sites, and discussion boards. From simply playing in proximity of another player without any direct contact, to inter-group relationships, mentors, guilds and even rivalries; player – player relationships are part of the driving force behind the success of MMOGs.

When I started playing EverQuest, I already had a few 'real life' friends in the game. They were much higher level than I was, so besides the random chatter in private messages, I had to spend a lot of the early levels by myself, soloing or trying to find random groups to play with. It was strange at first, to play around so many people that you didn't talk to or socialize with. It was quiet, hearing only the battle sounds, or the crunching of snow beneath my feet. I remember the first time another player came up to

me and offered me some of his old used equipment. He was done with it, as he was about 5 or 6 levels above me, and he said the going market value was so low it wasn't worth the trek back to the village. I remember feeling a bit excited – maybe I wouldn't die so much – but I also felt a little awkward. It was charity, and after playing a good month without really talking to any of the avatars around me, I didn't know what the protocol was on accepting used armour from strange Barbarians. At the time, I just typed /smile, /thank, /bow after clicking on the “accept” button to confirm the transaction. As the stranger walked away, I eagerly donned my new armour and ran off to find a mob to test its strength. Over the next few days, with much thanks to my newly acquired armour, I started to gain more confidence when I entered a battle and with it, more experience. That brief encounter stuck with me and I can honestly say it had a big impact on what type of player I became.

During the first 15-20 levels, I had always shied away from being in a group if I could help it. As a player, I was always nervous about messing up or not understanding what was expected of me. As a Shaman, I was always worried I was under-equipped and inexperienced. As I spent more time in the one area, I began to see the same faces, the same names around me. At first, interactions with other players were limited to inquiring whether or not a mob had already been claimed before I cast my spells on it. A few times, someone would see me struggling and come over and cast a healing spell on me or help me kill the mob that was getting the better part of me. Eventually, probably after saving my hide more than once, one of the familiar faces asked me to join their group. At this point, how could I say no? He had known how I played and he still asked me to join!

After making small talk about what areas were best to hunt in at our level, and

what spells and equipment we were working towards acquiring, we talked about our typical play times and added each other to our 'friends' lists. This was the first person I had met, and maintained a friendship with outside of the group of higher level friends that I knew through 'real' life. This friendship led to many other hunting groups that I was invited to through association. Looking back on this friendship, I realize that it was one of the most important player to player relationships that I had during all my years in EverQuest. It introduced me to other players, many who were, like myself, fumbling with the interface and grappling with their role and expectations within the game. These relationships helped me move forward, creating a style of play based on the relationships I had formed within this web of inter-related players.

Through the negotiation of shared meanings, player to player relationships are a fundamental element that helps create meaning within the play. These relationships evolve, and dissolve. Sometimes they grow into group and guild relationships where players share common goals. Sometimes the relationships are competitive, perhaps even hostile, but they all carry the potential to influence the process of identity construction and development.

Summary

These four relationships are core elements of identity construction and maintenance found within the gameplay of MMOGs. They exist within an overarching structure of game design and individualized play exhibited through the character creation stage, the development of role identities and through patterns of play; all of which carry their own identities. The multiplicity of identities within the player influences behavior, which in turn affects the perceptions of other identities within the player. The negotiation

of internal and external identities redefines and shapes identity to not only the player themselves, but to those around them as well.

As the elements that influence identity broadens within the gamespace of EverQuest, and other MMOGs, there is an increase in the need to move away from viewing identity as a focused nucleus within an individual. It is important to understand that stability is possible in a connected world as identities are not fragmented bits of self, but rather, are interconnected networks of meaning within the self that interact with elements external to the individual. By adding the complication of the avatar, through which all interactions in MMOGs occur, the question of who's identity we are talking about becomes blurred as player and avatar serve each other in the process of creating identity.

Conclusion

What began as a journey to understand the relationship between myself as a player and my avatar within the game world of EverQuest turned into a larger quest towards understanding the process of identity construction and maintenance in MMOG's. My objective was to be able to extrapolate the process to other goal oriented digital environments that use visual avatars.

In order to move forward, I needed to take a step back and move away from the commonly held idea that identity is centered on the player and look at the pieces that create identity as a whole. I accomplished this by distinguishing key elements of the game and its play and analysing their role within the larger process of identity construction and maintenance. These elements included both design elements, such as aesthetics and roles, as well as socially constructed elements, such as role expectations and notions of responsibility within the game community. When viewed in association with each other, the elements indicated a complex network of identity formation that does not rest in any one particular element of play or player, but rather as an interconnected, non-hierarchical process.

Starting with the point of entry into the game, the character creation process, I looked at the reasons behind the choices players made when creating their avatar. Although often at the forefront of identity, the aesthetic choices made at this stage were not completely within the control of the player, as they could only create their avatar with the selections made available to them by the game's design. Even in the beginning, in its simplest form of external representation we can see that identity was a negotiated process between the player and the game's design. Essentially, the goal of this chapter was to

delineate the aesthetic choices a player was confronted with before even realizing what these choices would mean in the larger context of the game.

The following chapter dealt with deconstructing elements of gameplay into actions, tasks and goals which cumulatively create individualized patterns of play. Through these patterns of play, the player creates a unique overarching narrative that influences the player's social and personal identity within the game. As a player dedicates more time to their character, they are often faced with an increase sense of commitment and responsibility to their avatars as well as to their player community. This combination of play patterns, commitment and responsibility creates the potential for a deeper level of identity construction for the player, their avatar and the social community they belong to.

Adding another element of complexity, class roles play an integral function in identity construction and maintenance within the game world. Class roles fulfill the functional aspect of the game because they provide each player a purpose within the competitive context of the game, but they also fulfill a larger social role. As players perform their role functions, they develop relationships with other players based on role expectations, social and role norms. As play patterns cumulate towards role fulfillment, players develop a more complex identity that is created by internal elements such as play choices, as well as external social elements.

Through the character creation, play patterns and role development, the player is faced with several other enveloping relationships that exist within the broader network of the game's design. These relationships include the relationship between players; the relationship between a player and their avatar; the relationship between avatars, and a relationship between the player and the game environment. The multiplicity of identity as

demonstrated through these four relationships decentralizes identity from a player-centric model and places it within an interconnected network of relationships which are connected to the larger structural elements of the game.

From this point it has been demonstrated that identity is not reducible to the player. Yet it is also important that the pendulum is not swung in the other direction, reducing the role of the avatar to that of a mere tool; an instrument used to fulfill a function. In the case of EverQuest, identity exists precariously between function and socialization, while being influenced by many other parts and pieces in between. Understanding this balance is what will potentially illuminate the precise nature of the relationship between player and avatar.

Beyond the confines of the game of EverQuest, it is important to ask what happens to identity in other MMOG's when certain elements described throughout this thesis are not present. Thinking of this and looking to the future, I see many new and interesting potential questions. As MMOG game design develops towards less time-consuming models, does the balance mentioned above shift to one side or the other? Does the avatar as tool argument become dominant when commitment and senses of responsibility are lessened? What about social obligations? How is identity altered in other games when there is less dependency on social networks within the game space? If these elements shift or change within game worlds, can other gameplay elements be examined which will reveal similar or even more complex networks of identity construction? What role does the technology, such as the computer screen, internet connection speed, graphic quality and other unexplored elements of game design, play in mediating the relationship between player and avatar? Is the decentralized networked

model of identity construction transferable to single player video games? How does the process of identification work in a mediated interactive environment compared to other visual media such as film?

On a quest to understand my relationship with Velixious, I unearthed a framework that led me to more questions than answers. With this framework in hand, I am walking away with a vaguely drawn map to the next level, anxiously entering un-chartered territory towards challenges I cannot yet fathom.

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