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THE MUTUAL INTERACTION OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE IDENTITIES IN MASSIVELY  
MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES:  
A STUDY OF EVE ONLINE PLAYERS

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of  
Antioch University Seattle  
Seattle, WA

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Psychology

By

Matthew Ponsford

November 2016

THE MUTUAL INTERACTION OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE IDENTITIES IN MASSIVELY  
MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES:  
A STUDY OF EVE ONLINE PLAYERS

This dissertation, by Matthew J. Ponsford, has been approved by the committee members signed below who recommend that it be accepted by the faculty of the Antioch University Seattle at Seattle, WA in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

THE MUTUAL INTERACTION OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE IDENTITIES IN MASSIVELY  
MULTIPLAYER ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITIES:  
A STUDY OF EVE ONLINE PLAYERS

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This phenomenological study was conducted to examine the ways that individuals experience massively multiplayer online games, and the interaction between online and offline identities. Ten members of the EVE Online community were interviewed about their experiences of the boundaries and crossovers between offline self and online character. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for consistent themes. Themes drawn from the data fell into three overarching categories: the Appeal of EVE, or the player motivations and qualities of the game environment that influence player investment; Self/Character Interaction, describing the ways in which online and offline identities interact; and Moral Dilemmas, in which players describe their thoughts and reactions to the moral ambiguity of EVE Online. Appeal of EVE contained the themes of Importance of Social Interaction, My Choices Matter, Altruism, and EVE Relationships are Meaningful. Self/Character Interaction contained the themes of My Character and I Are the Same, My Character and I Are Different, Parallels, Friction Between Selves, One Identity Learning From the Other, and Intersections. Moral Dilemmas contained the themes of My Prosocial Choices, Someone Else's Antisocial Choices, and Morality is Ambiguous. A final theme, not associated with any of the three categories, but present throughout all of them, was Emotional Content. These results were compared and contrasted with existing literature, and

conclusions were drawn about the parallel processes between online and offline selves. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA, <http://aura.antioch.edu/> and Ohio Link ETD Center, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/etd>

## Dedication

For my brother Benjamin, with whom video games have always been an important and meaningful point of connection.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Jude Bergkamp, Dr. Bill Heusler, and Dr. Mia Consalvo for their valuable time, support, and guidance throughout this process. Thank you to Ashley Strauss, Heather Spence, Leslie Christensen, Katja Ermann, Jess Stark, and all my other fellow imposters for helping me organize and articulate my ideas about this esoteric intersection of video games and psychology. Thank you to my family, for your unwavering support, encouragement, and confidence in me throughout this journey.



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## Chapter I: Introduction

The phenomenon of video game play has undergone a profound evolution in the last four decades, from humble beginnings as graphically and technically simple games approximating real-world sports to the sprawling, fantastic multiplayer environments filled with myriad choices and possibilities. Of particular interest is the rise of Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs). Within these digital spaces, people gather and organize in groups of tens, hundreds, or in some rare instances, thousands, to work together towards a common in-game goal. Some players invest as much time in a gaming community as they would a part- or full-time job. There is something tremendously compelling about these games that draws in players that vary widely in terms of gender, socioeconomic status, age, religion, ethnicity, and geographic location. Much of the literature related to the gaming phenomenon in general, and MMOs in particular, has a negative tone, making associations between gaming and aggressive, violent behavior, and social isolation. MMOs are sometimes framed as an addictive behavior (e.g., Byun et al., 2009; Griffiths & Wood, 2000) and some treatment programs specialize in gaming addiction. Indeed, there are a few sensational cases of teenagers becoming ill or even dying after playing games for several straight days, neglecting their need for food and sleep (BBC News, 2011).

Although instances of aggressive and addictive behavior are serious, it is disingenuous to characterize the entire gaming community in that light. While some individuals are becoming more aggressive, others are learning assertiveness, negotiation, cooperation, organization, problem-solving, and grappling with moral and ethical decisions. While some players become more isolated, others are finding a meaningful support network that includes individuals from all over the world, and are able to find meaningful interpersonal connections that they may be unable to find at home, school, or work. Over the last decade, attitudes about game play are

changing as a newer wave of research has begun to explore these pro-social and productive aspects of gaming (e.g., Kneer, Glock, Beskes, & Bente, 2012; Kneer, Munko, Glock, & Bente 2012; Zilberstein, 2013).

The Internet has become a useful mechanism for reinvention of an individual's identity and sense of self (Turkle, 1997). The ability to decide how one is viewed by others, in written form or by virtual visual representation, allows individuals to try on new characteristics and ways of self-presentation. Not only does an individual's offline personality predict their online behavior (Yee, Ducheneaut, Nelson, & Likarish, 2011), but trying out new behaviors online can lead to a change in offline behaviors as well (Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009). This interaction between online and offline behaviors and ways of being is increasingly relevant to how identity is constructed in a digital age.

The present study contributes to the understanding of the experience between the gamer and the MMO community, including the ways that an individual's online and offline identities mutually inform and change each other. A qualitative understanding of the phenomenon of online gaming will help diminish the stigmatization of a normative activity, and add to the clinical knowledge base of how identity is constructed in an increasingly digitized society. While this research would be highly relevant with an adolescent population, the present study will focus primarily on adults, as membership in the community studied requires a player to be at least 18 years of age.

## **Chapter II: Background**

Because the majority of the psychological literature on players' relationships to online gaming is focused on violence and aggressive behavior, the first section of this review refutes the argument that video games lead to violence and aggressive behavior, followed by arguments that gaming has potential for prosocial and therapeutic benefit. Next, the topics of identity, motivation, and social interactions pertaining to MMOs are explored. Ethnography is described as a popular method for approaching video game study, followed by an introduction to hermeneutic phenomenology, the qualitative method to be used in this study.

### **Video Games and Violence**

The pace of gameplay may be a confounding factor in the literature on video game violence; experimental designs are often split between violent and nonviolent games, but the presence or absence of violence is not the only way in which these games typically differ. The fast pace of some games appears to correlate with increased physiological arousal, indicating that the connection between gameplay and aggression is more complicated than violent content alone (Elson, 2013).

Studies such as Shin and Ahn (2013) suggest that playing games for prolonged periods of time in adolescence may lead to decreased social abilities. Unlike watching television or reading a book, video games invite the individual to become an active agent in the social interactions that take place within the game; however, Shin and Ahn observe that players are directed through a relatively narrow range of options that do not require the player to engage in cognitive empathy, and are not required to infer other characters' mental states. The authors do not address massively multiplayer online games, which are heavily focused on social interactions with other

players, nor do they mention the increasingly nuanced storytelling, characterization, and wide variety of potential courses of action present in modern games.

Moving away from the presupposition that video game use leads to violent behavior, Lee, Kang and Kang (2013) have identified several factors that mediate an individual's tendency towards aggressive in-game behavior and disposition towards real-world violence. Players with a high-level of commitment to in-game goals, belief in the central social-value system represented in the game, and personal attachment to their avatar were less-likely to display violent or aggressive behavior. In contrast, players who were identified as having an addiction to internet use—defined as a compulsive desire to participate in online activities without regard for the consequences—were more likely to display aggressive behavior. In sum, the prosocial aspects of the game appeared to mediate antisocial attitudes. Even in particularly violent games, the prosocial context in which the violent actions happen may affect the player's propensity to violent ideation and behavior. For example, in-game violence may occur in the context of rescuing one's friends, or saving the world, which may have the effect of increasing the accessibility of and attention to prosocial ideation in the player (Gitter, Ewell, Guadango, Stillman, & Baumeister, 2013).

Violence and prosocial behaviors are not simply two sides of the same coin; time spent playing games with more prosocial content predicts helping behaviors and empathic attitudes (Gentile et al., 2009). Playing games with prosocial content has been shown to increase the player's perception of humanity, defined as identifying with traits unique to humans, such as conscientiousness, organization, and friendliness (Greitemeyer, 2013).

## **Therapeutic Benefit of Gaming**

Traditional Western values measure success in terms of personal and professional growth and transformation, quantified in material acquisitiveness and ascension of social hierarchies (Cushman, 1995). The majority of individuals are met with significant sociopolitical barriers to success, both implicit and explicit, that prevent them from “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps,” as expected by Western culture. Within this context, video games create an experience where goals are tangible and achievable, and the means for achieving them are explicit and accessible. The narrative structure present in many role-playing games provides a path that ends in personal transformation, power, and status, creating for the player a feeling of success, power, and mastery.

A growing body of literature indicates a number of therapeutic benefits to video game play. On one level, games are a stress-relief mechanism that helps people recuperate from stress and strain, which is more complex than escapism or an avoidance of aversive stimuli (Klimmt, Dorothee, & Vorderer, 2009). Games can be used for self-regulation and relaxation by providing an experience of mastery, control, and psychological detachment from work (Reinecke, 2009).

Virtual environments have been demonstrated to be an effective tool for treating phobias and posttraumatic stress disorders (Malbos, Rapee, & Kavakli, 2013; Schultheis & Rizzo, 2001). Researchers working with software designed to create gaming environments have been able to create settings that mimic environments to be used for exposure therapy, providing subjects an experience akin to in vivo exposure without the financial and logistical barriers inherent in exposure therapy (Emmelkamp et al., 2002). Though the average gamer is not engaged in such an explicitly therapeutic endeavor, the use of gaming technology for exposure therapy

demonstrates that virtual worlds can create a sense of immersion that elicits cognitive and affective changes that carry over into face-to-face interactions.

Virtual communities have a unique ability to create an accessible place for people with physical or mental disabilities to socialize or find information, education, and support about their condition (Gilbert, Murphy, Krueger, Ludwig, & Efron, 2013). Virtual communities have advantages over brick-and-mortar support programs in eliminating practical and logistical demands, such as transportation or physical exhaustion. Participants in virtual communities have the capacity to create an avatar who can participate in the environment without the restrictions that operate on their real-world body; a paraplegic user can walk, and an agoraphobic user can be close to other people without emotional constraints (Gilbert et al., 2013, p. 209). After three months of participation in the virtual community of Second Life, individuals with various disabilities, such as generalized anxiety disorder, amputation, or obesity, showed significant improvements in anxiety and depression, a more positive self-concept, and improved self-esteem (Gilbert et al., 2013, p. 217), demonstrating the transformative potential of online communities.

### **Avatar and Identity Expression**

*Avatar* is a Sanskrit word referring to the appearance of a deity on Earth. Within the world of technology, social media, and gaming, an avatar is a visual representation of the user within the virtual space. An avatar can be as simple as a static icon or photo, or as elaborate as a fully animated character.

The creation of an avatar is often a deep and complex process, with a wide variety of options in terms of height, weight, facial structure, race, gender, hair style, nose length, chin depth, and other features. Avatars can be extravagantly or simply dressed, can appear studious or aggressive. Different games provide different options and limits for what is and isn't available to

adjust, but they are all alike in that they are a creative expression of the individual player. In terms of marketing, avatar creation is almost a standard feature because a player has more fun and becomes more invested if they feel as though their avatar is an expression or extension of their self (Trepte & Reinecke, 2010). Some players create avatars that resemble them as closely as possible, some want to try on a completely new and different self-expression. Trepte and Reinecke found some evidence that avatar similarity is linked to life satisfaction; if a player is happier with their life, then they may be more likely to choose a self-similar avatar.

There is something compelling about the process by which a person creates an avatar, deciding how they want to be represented within the digital milieu. The player is suddenly engaged in a dialogue about who one is, what one wants to be. The player is confronted not just with decisions about how they want to physically appear, but what one's behaviors and values are like, how they will interact with others, and how they will situate themselves within the social structure. Many role-playing games present the player with a finite number of points to assign to various skills or attributes. One might be presented with the option to play as a warrior, wizard, or rogue, with trait emphasis on strength, intelligence, and cunning, respectively. Single-player games, where interactions with other characters are scripted, sometimes ask players to assign finite point values to intelligence, wisdom, or social skills such as charm or intimidation. A player might personally value and emphasize traits of intelligence and charm, but acknowledge that those skills may not serve the character in the game, the emphasis of which may be on combat and conflict. The player is then engaged in a dialogue about who they are as an individual, and how they compare to the avatar. Depending on the type of game, the player may be able to create alternate avatars, providing multiple opportunities to define themselves and try out new ways of being.



There is emerging evidence that one's choice of avatar can affect an individual's self-perception and behavior in face-to-face interactions. Yee and Bailenson (2009) placed subjects in a virtual-reality environment, interacting with a research confederate, before meeting the confederate in person and engaging in a money-negotiation exercise. The researchers randomly assigned the subjects avatars that were identical except in respect to height. Subjects who were given taller avatars were significantly more likely to express assertive negotiating tactics in the second exercise. Yee and Bailenson hypothesize that the subject with the taller avatar observes himself or herself as tall, associated with traits of power, dominance, and assertiveness. In the negotiation exercise, the subjects carryover a sense of themselves as assertive and dominant, validating the idea that avatar selection influences later self-concept and actions, a phenomenon the authors refer to as the Proteus effect. Individuals are more likely to experience this shift in self-concept in online environments where the self is represented by an avatar, as opposed to text-only message boards and forums (Gomes, 2012).

Individuals often present themselves very differently between multiple contexts: at work, one may present themselves as relatively conservative, methodical, and shy; at school, one might present as philosophical, thoughtful, and serious; among friends, one might present as caring, spontaneous, and gregarious (McConnell, 2011). Each of these roles taps into a different facet of the individual's personality and sense of self, and each aspect represents a genuine part of the individual's self-aspect, even when they appear to contradict one another. When there are aspects of an individual's personality that are unable to find representation in any one of these context-specific roles, she may feel anxious or depressed.

Virtual environments, with the ability to create and experiment with one or multiple avatars, provide a milieu in which people can express these suppressed aspects of their identity.

This phenomenon is evident in research related to role-playing, the practice of presenting oneself in a game fully “in character,” pretending to be a fictional character within the game setting (Williams, Kennedy, & Moore, 2001). The authors found that marginalized groups were more likely to engage in role play, and many of these individuals felt as though their role play performance was more similar to their actual self than the persona they shared with colleagues and acquaintances.

Players identify with avatars not just because they represent them visually, but because they represent and express an individual’s intentionality, locomotion, agency, and social participation (Hamilton, 2009; Vasalou & Joinson, 2009). Players typically refer to avatar behavior in the first person, such as “I had to walk all the way across the map,” as opposed to “Commander Shepard had to walk all the way across the map.” Hamilton (2009) compares avatar creation to abstract portraiture, where imperfections, abstractions, and exaggerated features are what make it an accurate representation.

Players creating an avatar are typically balancing competing motives of self-verification and self-enhancement; the avatar must be similar enough to the user to create a sense of identification and sameness, but is also typically different from the user in ways that propel the ego upward: taller, stronger, faster, more handsome, more confident, etc. (Hamilton, 2009). Players who are members of marginalized groups, such as racial or sexual minorities, may experience the visual and behavioral differences between their physical body and their avatar as an expression of their “true” self (Williams et al., 2011). Many individuals feel as though their face-to-face interactions are scripted, as they need to behave in certain ways in order to fit into the dominant culture; interacting through an avatar provides a context in which these barriers and pressures are removed.

With the capacity for identification, immersion and self-improvement comes the possibility of experiencing personal loss, insult, or trauma. With the investment of time, energy, and thought that goes into creating a character, the avatar can be conceived as an emotionally salient cultural artifact, (Wolfendale, 2007). LambdaMOO was an early text-based virtual world, in which users would interact with each other by typing out their actions, such as “Matthew enters the room, setting his laptop down on the table.” An individual user was typically able to interact only in their own voice, indicated by a prompt with their name and internet protocol (IP) address attached to it. In this community, a user called Mr. Bungle ran a program that allowed him to use another player’s name and IP address while the other player was still logged in (Dibbell, 1993). The hacker wrote several statements that had a woman’s character perform sexual acts on another character, causing a traumatic experience of personal violation, loss of control, and embarrassment for the woman in front of her social community. While the virtual worlds and avatars are intangible artifacts removed from the physical world, players experience a sense of connection, immersion, personal identity and ownership that has real and significant effects on their sense of self, both positive and negative.

In the context of gaming research, Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold (2012) differentiate between four concurrent identities or selves at play: avatar, character, player, and user. The user is the offline identity of the individual; player refers to one’s “persistent, socially performed identity”; character refers to the fictionalized values and behaviors associated with the particular game; and the avatar is the visual representation of the character (Carter et al., 2012, p. 68). Interviews of a sample of EVE Online players found that individuals more closely identified to their player identity than their character, validating online identity as more complex than the binary notion of avatar and user, and inviting a closer look into the interaction and intersection of these identities.

## **Motivation**

Many video game researchers have begun to examine motivations for video game play over the last decade (Verhagen, Feldberg, van den Hooff, Meents, & Merikivi, 2012). The challenge of comparing empirical literature about motivation for gameplay is the lack of a single, comprehensive model for multiple researchers to work from. Working in a relatively new field of study, many authors devise a novel model of gaming motivation to work from, with nuances that make comparisons between studies imprecise.

Yee (2006) introduced a typology of gaming motivations that accounted for 55% of the total variance in a survey of 3,000 online game players, grouped into three larger categories of social, achievement, and immersion motivations. Motivations in the social category included: socializing, an interest in helping or chatting with other players; relationship, a drive to form lasting friendships and partnerships with other players; and teamwork, deriving satisfaction from being part of a larger group. The achievement category included: advancement, a desire to gain power, wealth, and in-game status; mechanics, an interest in mastering the rules and constructs of the game to fine-tune character performance; and competition, a desire to challenge oneself and other players. The immersion motivations included: discovery, and exploring the in-game environment; role-playing, or creating an in-game persona that differs from the player's true identity; customization, or tweaking the appearance and accessories of the avatar or environment; and escapism, using the game to relax and distract the player from their normal life. A survey of online game players found a significant correlation between self-reported motivations and actual in-game behavior, validating Yee's typology (Billieux et al., 2013).

Park, Song, and Teng (2011) explored the links between personality and gaming motivation by comparing Big 5 personality traits to a motivation scale adapted from Yee's

(2006) typology, which included relationship, adventure, escapism, relaxation, and achievement. The hypothesis was that different personality types would correlate with different motivations for gaming. A correlational analysis demonstrated that the personality traits of agreeableness and extroversion were predictors of gameplay motivation in general, inclusive of all five categories. This result appears reductive and counterintuitive to the diversity of the larger demographic of game players (Yee, Ducheneaut, Shiao, & Nelson, 2012). This is likely a result of the homogeneity of the sample size, which consisted of 3,000 Korean college students, and from which the five motivation categories were derived (Park, Song, & Teng, 2011).

Another model, proposed by Verhagen et al. (2012), is rooted in motivation theory. In this model, the likelihood of an individual participating in a virtual community is predicted by various motivators including the perceived usefulness of the community, entertainment value, perceived ease of use, and economic value of the activity. The authors also emphasize the importance of examining intrinsic and extrinsic motivators concurrently. The model views gaming in behavioral terms of using an information system, and not in experiential terms of being part of a community, and thus misses an important aspect of what draws individuals to invest time and energy into virtual worlds.

Przybylski, Rigby and Ryan (2010) outline a model influenced by Cognitive Evaluation Theory. According to this model, individuals spend time playing video games in order to meet needs of competence, autonomy, and/or relatedness. Different types of games meet these needs to greater or lesser degrees; for instance, Guitar Hero provides a tiered skill progression system that rewards the player with audience cheering, providing a sense of competence. MMOs such as World of Warcraft encourage players to form cooperative groups to accomplish in-game goals, addressing a need for socialization. A drawback of this model is that it focuses on individual

deficits, and may inadvertently serve to perpetuate negative stereotypes about the gaming community: that gamers are socially inept or incompetent.

Contrasting with literature about the harmful effects of game play in children (e.g., Shin & Ahn, 2013), Olson (2010) frames gaming in terms of normative developmental tasks. Middle-school children (aged 12–14 years) are focused on developing social skills, and online gaming provides a means of structuring time to spend with friends, competing with one another, and mutual learning. Olson (2010, p. 182) observes that “online gaming appears to offer a rare opportunity for an adolescent to take multiple roles (including leader) in a diverse, multiage team.” The Eriksonian developmental task in adolescence is one of identity versus role confusion, where adolescents are experimenting with different identities and means of self-expression (Erikson, 1968). As discussed above, avatar customization can be a means of experimenting with different identities and ways of being.

Becoming a competent member of an online gaming community requires that the player practice and become competent in small-group organization, instrumental coordination, and sociability (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005). Specific skills can include approaching strangers, recruiting, small-group formation, cooperation, playing a team role, initiating small talk, and empathy (Ducheneaut & Moore, 2005, p. 98). Development and practice of these skills within the game can lead to an increased use of these skills in face-to-face interactions, making a strong case for online games as a social learning tool (Yee et al., 2009).

### **Avatar-Mediated Interaction**

Individual communication between avatars lacks the nuance of face-to-face communication, even in the best of circumstances (Moore, Ducheneaut, & Nickell, 2006). Due to lack of eye contact and other nonverbal cues, the flow of conversation is more difficult to

negotiate in a virtual space than in person. Moore et al. compared transcripts of virtual and in-person conversations, and found that conversations between avatars included longer pauses and accidental interruptions. In contrast, the face-to-face conversations were much more fluid, pauses were significantly shorter, and speakers were able to finish each other's sentences.

If the human avatars became too lifelike in their presentation in order to reproduce the subtleties of nonverbal communication, the user is likely to find the lifelike qualities eerie and disturbing, disrupting the sense of immersion in the virtual world (Tinwell, Nabi, & Charlton, 2013). The phenomenon of the uncanny valley—where human representations in wax sculpture or robotics become unsettling to the viewer as they become increasingly lifelike—will pose a dilemma to designers of virtual worlds as they seek to increase sociability between avatars (Mori, 2012).

Despite these limitations to communication, players are able to achieve a level of immersion that allows them to connect with their avatar and the virtual space in meaningful ways (Graber & Graber, 2010). Many games include a variety of social gestures, such as waving of hands or shrugging of shoulders, or facial expressions such as smiling or frowning. Proxemics and personal space are relevant in virtual settings; an unknown avatar following closely behind another player can create confusion and discomfort similar to real-world interactions.

In a qualitative study of online gamers, Christou, Law, Zaphiris, & Ang (2013) identified several aspects of online games that promote social interaction between players, beyond basic communication tools, gestures, and grouping or guild features. Designing characters that have built-in strengths and weaknesses, such as differentiated combat, healing, and support classes, fosters an interdependence between players that rewards cooperation and grouping. Introducing common goals, or a common enemy, is a factor that Christou et al. (2013, p. 730) refer to as

“sociability through empathy.” World of Warcraft divides player characters into “Alliance” and “Horde” factions, bolstered by extensive lore that explains the history of the conflict between the two, and provides players with a common enemy to stand against.

Each of these properties—proxemics, nonverbal gestures, interdependence, and sociability through empathy—help to create a space where individuals develop meaningful social connections, despite the limitations inherent in virtual communication.

### **Social Processes Between Individuals, Avatars, and Communities**

There has been concern among media scholars that the proliferation of home technology—such as television and internet access—have begun to isolate people, and decrease involvement in community and social engagement, a phenomenon referred to as the “bowling alone” hypothesis (Putnam, 2000). There is more to bowling than the game itself; equally important is the proximity to other people in the bowling alley, the ability to gather there with a group of friends, and the opportunity to meet and interact with new people. Moving a person’s hobbies indoors replaces the hobby itself, but not the social engagement surrounding the hobby, leading to a decline in civic and social life, and a decline in “third places” where people gather to socialize separately from the “first and second” places of work and home or school (Oldenberg, 1999).

These social spaces are distinguished as such by several characteristics (Oldenberg, 1999). Third places are neutral grounds, where people are able to come and go as they please without a set schedule. Third places level the social hierarchies, diminishing the importance of rank and status in the workplace or society in general. Conversation is the primary activity, and playfulness and wit are encouraged. Third places are relatively easy to access, and accommodate whoever comes to them. They tend to have a group of “regulars,” who are frequently present,



and give the environment a distinct character. Third places also give community members a sense of home-away-from-home, with a feeling of warmth, comfort, and lack of pretension.

Framing use of the Internet in terms of the bowling alone hypothesis does not take into account the qualitatively different types of activities people engage in, from watching cat videos or downloading music to writing on discussion boards or coordinating with friends to complete a quest in an MMO. Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) argue that virtual communities offer all of the qualities outlined by Oldenberg to constitute a location for social engagement. Within an MMO, players begin with the same level of in-game experience, and are able to create their appearance in any way they want, diminishing the implicit power, privilege, and limitations that come with age, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. MMOs are widely accessible and available to anybody who wants to play; there are no affiliation, degree, or status requirements to join. Nearly 80% of MMO players play as part of a guild, or a small collective of players that organizes and meets to socialize and to meet in-game goals. Each guild has a distinct mood and tone, whether playful, goal-directed, or convivial, based on the members that are typically present. Players are intrinsically and socially motivated to play, as opposed to needing to participate for a paycheck.

Steinkuehler and Williams' (2006) argument for MMOs as third places is not without flaws. While virtual environments are able to accommodate a wide variety of people, many require monthly fees, and most require a computer that is able to run the game, which can be fairly expensive. Some content of an MMO—specific quests, items, or environments—is only accessible to players who have reached a certain level of achievement within the game, which can represent a major time investment that is impractical for casual players. Virtual environments

also lack the ability to anchor a neighborhood community the way a brick-and-mortar café or barbershop might.

Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickel, & Moore (2006) question the quality of social interactions that take place within World of Warcraft, observing that players banding together form a mutual audience for one another's exploits, as opposed to forming a group of friends. The quality of social interaction is improved in the context of player guilds, where members frequently play with the same groups of people, and more meaningful relationships can be formed; in this example, the game community extends beyond the game itself to include online forums and guild websites.

Some MMOs have attempted to make socialization a meaningful aspect of the game itself. Star Wars Galaxies, an MMO based in the universe of the Star Wars franchise, integrated taverns and cantinas into all of the virtual towns. Player characters would experience combat fatigue while out completing missions, and would need to heal their fatigue by interacting with entertainers in the cantina, creating a requirement for players to spend time in this social space. Other players might choose to be a musician or dancer, and would gain experience points by healing other players, creating a need for interaction between different classes of characters. The cantina environment ultimately failed to become the social space that the game designers imagined (Ducheneaut et al., 2006). Many of the entertainers were run by automated scripting programs created by users that allowed them to gain experience and superficially interact without the human player being present. The text-based chat medium was separated into public and private channels; the public channel would be flooded with erroneous messages and advertisements from the automated characters, making public conversation difficult or impossible. In order to converse, players would use private channels, which would eliminate the

possibility of a casual conversation that others could drop in and out of, akin to chatting between regulars at a brick-and-mortar bar or café.

### **Chapter III: Approach to Present Study**

In this chapter, the platform chosen for this present study, EVE Online, will be discussed, as will its relevance and utility to the topic. Virtual ethnography will be described as a methodology common to the study of MMOs, and hermeneutic phenomenology will be explained as a meaningful alternative. This chapter concludes with a rationale for the present research.

#### **Environment of Present Study: EVE Online**

EVE Online (CCP Games, 2003), an MMO set in a futuristic, science-fiction universe, is unique among online games in its limited plot structure, strong emphasis on player organization, and player-versus-player gameplay. Games such as World of Warcraft are designed around dungeons and plot lines written and created by the game developer; group activities involve banding together to face a pre-determined dungeon populated with specific enemies, often with a boss fight at the end. While EVE has a small handful of artificial missions, the bulk of the game revolves around large groups of players, called corporations, fighting for control of parts of the galaxy and access to resources. Treaties and allegiances are made and broken, major battles consisting of hundreds or thousands of players are organized, and political hierarchies and economies are generated independently of the game developers.

While many online communities emphasize the creation and presentation of a personal avatar, the use of an avatar in EVE is minimized. Players generate a three-dimensional humanoid character when they begin the game, but the avatar is only ever visible as a small portrait icon at the edge of the screen, one among many other icons in a very busy visual space. In 2011, CCP introduced a “captain’s quarters” feature, where the player could walk around a small area within a space station using their avatar. As a single-player activity, users are not able to see or interact

with other players in this space. While this created a temporary sense of embodiment and identification with the avatar, the space is functionally useless. CCP introduced this feature as a preliminary step towards creating an immersive 3D environment; the player community rejected these efforts as irrelevant to the core gameplay of EVE, and the captain's quarter project has been on indefinite hold ever since.

The player is visually represented in the game as the spaceship that they are currently using, but because a player can have multiple ships in their hangar to be used at any time, and because any given ship can be permanently destroyed, the player is *in* the ship, rather than being the ship itself. There is some amount of self-expression inherent in ship selection, as a player may choose to fly an industrial barge, an exploration vessel, or a battleship. Training for the requisite in-game certifications to use larger, more advanced ships takes a considerable investment of time, effort, and in-game currency, implying a degree of status for using these ships. Theoretically, the ability of this milieu to facilitate a shift in one's sense of identity may be minimal, due to the under-utilization of a creative avatar (Gomes, 2012).

More than other MMOs, EVE is notorious for having a steep learning curve, with many complicated systems to learn in order to participate competently in group activities. Where some games provide a sequential scaffolding of new information, building on skills and capabilities one at a time, EVE thrusts the new player immediately into an interface populated by multiple windows, toolbars, and functions, with a tutorial that provides the user with minimal information as to how to complete a task (Bergstrom, Carter, Woodford, & Paul, 2014). The tutorial provides no information about how to become involved with the social and political aspects of the game, requiring players to rely on out-of-game message boards and in-game "Newbie Advice" chat channels in order to overcome the initial knowledge hurdle. This tactic appears to implicitly

orient players towards the most salient aspect of the game: interdependence among players, and the formation of player organizations.

World of Warcraft has artificial “choke points,” where many roads lead to a city or marketplace where many players are milling around a common virtual space, looking for partners, seeking to trade items, or chatting with other players. Because EVE takes place in deep space, there are no such choke points, as planets, space stations, or other objects are hundreds or thousands of kilometers away from each other. Star gates, which provide quick passage from one star system to another, are locations that require frequent use by players, but the speed at which ships approach and use the gate is such that a player may only be present at a gate for less than a minute, eliminating the plausibility of incidental, casual interaction with other players in the area (Bergstrom et al., 2014). While it is possible to chat with individuals within the same system, the lack of a visual indication of participating activity makes contact with strangers as uninviting as a phone book.

Because of these spatial considerations, player corporations primarily use out-of-game message boards and voice chat channels for planning, organization, and socializing, which Bergstrom et al. (2014) refer to as EVE’s metagame. Woodford (2012) points out that any research in EVE that focuses on the game and ignores the metagame is missing a fundamental part of the experience.

Despite the de-emphasis on avatar representation and in-game socializing, EVE Online players demonstrate a strong sense of community. Sean Smith was a United States military officer stationed in Benghazi, Libya, who was killed in the line of duty in 2012 (Gibbs, Carter, & Mori, 2013). In the EVE community, Smith was known as Vile Rat, a prominent member of a major player corporation, Goonswarm. In addition to obituaries and reports in the mass media,

from CCP, and on EVE Online forums, several in-game memorials were erected by players to commemorate Vile Rat. In the star system that was home to Goonswarm operations, nearly a hundred players cooperatively deployed warp-bubbles, large, glowing orbs typically used to prevent an enemy ship from escaping a battle, in a formation that read “RIP Vile Rat.” Creating such a display that was large enough to be viewed from a great distance was a testament to the community’s collective grief.

Bergstrom et al. (2014) suggest that the steep learning curve in EVE creates a feeling of exceptionalism among players that enhances the sense of community identity. Because the available user guides are developed by players, they include language and memes specific to websites such as Reddit and 4Chan, using words and phrases such as “fag,” “faggot,” “bitch,” and “bro” frequently, and use highly sexualized representations of women (Bergstrom, 2013). Bergstrom (2013) argues that this functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that discourages certain players, and socializes remaining players into a specific, masculinized language and culture, evidenced by the fact that only an estimated 5% of EVE players are female. As a result, the players that endure the initial hurdles of access to the game share a sense of being part of an exclusive community.

Gameplay in EVE is comparatively unregulated in terms of player conduct (Carter & Gibbs, 2013). Players are able to cheat, steal from, exploit, and con other players, provided that such activities do not involve hacking player accounts. The ability for a player to be taken advantage of creates a sense of mistrust that is not present in other MMOs, and changes the nature of player interactions.

## Virtual Ethnography

Many studies of MMOs are framed as ethnographic research (e.g., Drennan, 2007), describing the customs and practices of the community, capturing the social meanings and ordinary activities of individuals. These studies operate under the assumption that the game is a social space separate and removed from the offline context of individual users, with different rules, values, and expectations. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) refer to this distinction as the “magic circle,” a phenomenon which they compare to a boxing ring: in typical situations, aggressiveness and violence are considered antisocial and possibly criminal behaviors, but when one steps into a boxing ring, it is suddenly acceptable—and expected—to assault the other person in the ring.

Other authors (e.g., Lehdonvirta, 2010; Taylor, 2009) challenge the notion that online communities can be meaningfully separated from offline context. Virtual worlds are often presumed to be separate and dichotomous with the real world in terms of space, population, identity, relationships, institutions, economy, law and politics. In EVE Online, the concept of physical space cannot be ignored; player corporations recruit members based on the time zone that players reside in, so that during times of conflict, someone is online at all times to keep watch while players on the other side of the planet are offline. Virtual identity cannot be separated from online identity; even if a player is role-playing the persona of a medieval knight, she is unable to compartmentalize her 21st century values and technical knowledge from the character. Restricting research analysis to the virtual setting prevents a full understanding of the powerful and compelling relationship between the individual and the virtual community (Fung, 2006; Malaby, 2007).



## **Hermeneutic Phenomenology**

Phenomenological research is the study of lived experience, attempting to understand the essence of the world as it is experienced by individuals before they have a chance to categorize and analyze it themselves. Phenomenology is rooted in an assumption that certain phenomena of life are too complex to be “made intellectually crystal clear or theoretically perfectly transparent,” (Manen, 1999, p. 17). Hermeneutic phenomenology takes an expression of human experience—observational data, interviews, journals, diaries, art, etc—and views them as a text for interpretation. Manen (1999) explains a central paradox in hermeneutic phenomenology:

To *do* hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal. The phenomenological reduction teaches us that complete reduction is impossible, that full or final descriptions are unattainable. But rather than therefore giving up on human science altogether, we need to pursue its project with extra vigor. (p.18)

Situating the role of the researcher relative to the subject being studied is an important consideration to qualitative research. Appealing to objectivity, some researchers consider themselves to be completely separate from the research subject, in order to assert that the data gained was not altered by the researcher’s own beliefs and assumptions. This practice of “bracketing” the researcher ignores the implicit ways that the researcher is part of the project: by being present, by choosing to ask or not ask certain questions, or by attending or not attending to certain data points, the researcher’s beliefs become part of the study. Phenomenologists make their pre-suppositions, beliefs, and assumptions about the topic clear at the beginning, to prevent them from “persistently creep[ing] back into our reflections,” (Manen, 1999, p. 47). The project may even include the researcher’s experience of the phenomenon as a starting point.

Hermeneutic phenomenology takes acknowledgment of the researcher’s subjectivity a step further, adopting the stance that objective reduction of a phenomenon is impossible, and

accepting the idea that there are endless possible interpretations (Kafle, 2011). The researcher's interpretation, informed by their personal context, is seen as an imperfect understanding of the phenomenon which functions as a "signpost pointing towards essential understanding" of the subject (Kafle, 2011, p. 189).

### **Rationale for Present Study**

The present study is designed to qualitatively analyze the connection between online and offline identities, and to elucidate the mutual interaction between the two. A phenomenological methodology will be used to understand the lived experience of EVE Online players, what it means to be part of the EVE community, and how participation affects a player's sense of self: the phenomenon of personal investment in a virtual community.

Previous research on motivation, identity expression/exploration, and social interactions have focused on MMOs that emphasize the creation of an avatar and the proximal interaction with other players in a bounded virtual space. EVE Online offers a platform from which to understand these variables in a non-avatar virtual environment, which may provide an understanding of the phenomenon separate from avatar presentation alone, and provide a distinction between the roles of player, character, and avatar as outlined by Carter et al. (2012). The relatively unrestricted rules of gameplay and implicit invitation to deceitful behaviors pose interesting challenges in establishing trust with other players; it will be useful to understand how players negotiate these dilemmas, and how they consolidate those behaviors with their offline identity. Examining the unique experience of players in the EVE Online community will increase the literature on the complex interaction between an individual's sense of self in virtual and physical worlds; the interaction between physical, extended, and phenomenal conceptions of

identity (Childs, 2011); and the potentially prosocial effects of MMO participation on a player's experience and behaviors in their physical lives.

## **Chapter IV: Methodology**

The complete methodology was submitted to and obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Antioch University Seattle in the Fall of 2014.

### **Research Question**

What is an EVE Online player's experience of the interaction between online and offline identities?

### **Participant Selection**

Because of the lack of social hubs located in-game, participants were recruited from the metagame, the EVE Online message boards (Woodford, 2012). Participants were to be at least 18 years of age, as required for creation of an EVE Online account, and represented as much as possible a diversity of age, gender, geographic location, socioeconomic status, length of time in the EVE community, and game play type. Some players choose industrial game play, focused on mining in-game materials and manufacturing in-game goods; other players focus on piracy, attacking or exploiting vulnerable characters; still others focus on larger-scale combat gameplay. Each of these play types represents a different type of social engagement with other EVE players, and including players of each type improved the generalizability of results. If after 10 interviews, the participants had been found to be demographically homogeneous in terms of diversity and/or game role, a second call for participants would have been made to the EVE Online message boards with a request for specific demographic variables to increase the heterogeneity of the final sample.

### **Materials**

Participants were provided with an informed consent document via email (Appendix A). Because of the logistical hurdles of obtaining a signature, participants were asked to respond to

the email with “I Agree” in the subject line to indicate their consent. Interviews conducted and recorded via a private TeamSpeak voice-messaging client.

## **Procedures**

In the first phase of this study, I conducted experiential observations of the EVE Online community through direct participation as a game player. An understanding the textual context of the game, including the interface and available options of player behaviors and activities, was important in creating culturally-informed and contextually-relevant interview questions (Consalvo & Dutton, 2006). The observational data collected occurred within the naturalistic setting of the game, and included no specific player information, consistent with ethical considerations for social media research (Moreno, Goniu, Moreno, & Diekema, 2013).

The second phase consisted of semi-structured interviews. The number of interviews in a qualitative study may range between 5 and 25 (Polkinghorne, 1989); for this study, participants were solicited by posting an advertisement on the official EVE Online forums. After signing an informed consent document, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted via TeamSpeak. Vocal interviews were more ideal to this study than written interviews by email or text-chat client, because the act of writing allows more time for the user to reflect on their experience, rather than providing concrete, raw details of their lived experience. Initially, questions were broad and open-ended, aimed at the participants’ experience of identity and EVE community membership, and contexts or situations that influence and affect the participant’s experiences. Sample questions included:

- How much do you consider yourself to be playing a character, and how much is your character an extension of your actual self?

- What is a recent major event in your EVE experience, and how has it affected you in the physical world, in terms of your sense of self, or decisions that you make in your physical life?
- What is a recent major event in your physical life, and how has it affected your decisions or attitudes in EVE online?
- How have your interactions in the social milieu of EVE been similar or different to your social experiences in your physical life?

Once the narrative details of the participant's experience have been collected, the interview will shift to a collaborative conversation, where participants will be invited to reflect on their experiences, in order to uncover the deeper meaning to their experience.

### **Data Analysis**

Identity is a fluid, subjective construct that is difficult to operationalize. Narrative conceptualizations of identity view the self in terms of an internalized, ongoing story about the self (McAdams, 2008). Narratives are composed of vivid and emotionally-salient events in an individual's life that reflect recurrent life concerns. By conceptualizing identity in terms of an ongoing story, this model avoids the paradox of changing beliefs about the self. Where other studies of online identity have focused on a singular, operationalized aspect of identity such as extroversion (Gomes, 2012), narrative identity is ideal for the present study in its qualitative nature, and its flexibility to the participants' individual interpretation and meaning-making.

Interviews will be transcribed and viewed as a "text" for careful interpretation. A thematic analysis will be conducted, where interviews will be scanned for significant statements, sentences, or quotes that evoke an understanding of the participants' experience (Moustakas, 1994). A text will be read several times, with the question, "What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem

particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?” (Manen, 1999, p. 93). Resulting statements, quotes and memos will then be analyzed and synthesized together into emergent themes that describe common experiences of the phenomenon across participants.

## Chapter V: Results

### Data Collection

Ten players of EVE Online were interviewed. Participants included three women and seven men, ranging in age from early 20s to late 50s. One participant was located in the United Kingdom, one in Canada, and the rest were distributed across the continental United States. Participants' experience of the game ranged between one and ten years, with the average being about five years. An initial invitation was posted to the official EVE Online forums, and three participants were recruited from there; snowball sampling was used to gather the remaining seven participants. Twelve players were contacted, and two declined to participate. Players were varied in their style of play, including focuses on industry, mining, combat, leadership, and others who primarily logged into the game to chat with their friends.

Experiential data was collected over the course of about a year, as I logged an average of 12 hours per week in EVE Online. This experience was prior to and concurrent with interview data collection, as I began interviews during my fourth month of engagement with EVE. Notes and memos regarding my thoughts and reaction to these experiences were kept.

Consent forms describing the nature, procedure, and implications of the research were emailed to the participants, who indicated their consent by responding to the email with "I Agree" in the subject line. All interviews were conducted via the researcher's private TeamSpeak channel. Each interview began with a general question about participants' interest and experiences playing EVE Online. All interviews lasted for one hour, and were recorded and transcribed. Additional data included memos of thoughts and reactions that occurred during the interview process, and this data was analyzed along with interview transcriptions. Interview data was abstracted into individual codes, which were aggregated into predominant themes.



## Summary of Findings

Themes drawn from the data fell into three over-arching categories: the Appeal of EVE, or the player motivations and qualities of the game environment that influence player investment; Self/Character Interaction, describing the ways in which online and offline identities interact; and Moral Dilemmas, in which players describe their thoughts and reactions to the moral ambiguity of EVE Online. Appeal of EVE contains the themes of Importance of Social Interaction, My Choices Matter, Altruism, and EVE Relationships are Meaningful.

Self/Character Interaction contains the themes of My Character and I Are the Same, My Character and I Are Different, Parallels, Friction Between Selves, One Identity Learning From the Other, and Intersections. Moral Dilemmas contains the themes of My Prosocial Choices, Someone Else's Antisocial Choices, and Morality is Ambiguous. A final theme, not associated with any of the three categories, but present throughout all of them, is Emotional Content.

### Appeal of EVE Online

**Importance of social interaction.** All participants emphasize in some way that the interpersonal connections with other players have a greater impact on their commitment to the game than the gameplay itself. Many participants went so far as to say that the gameplay is not compelling in and of itself, or is even boring. Others pointed out that they rarely engage with the gameplay at all, and log in only to interact with their friends.

So if I lost EVE I would still have the bulk of people who are very . . . have become very dear to me. The ones who I just sit down and we talk all day, and Skype or whatever, about things that aren't EVE, just because we enjoy each other's company. I wouldn't lose them, and that's kind of the most important thing about EVE for me at this point. I enjoy the game, I enjoy playing, but what's addictive for me has become a lot of these relationships that I've built. (Participant 5)

How could you possibly run out of stuff to do? I mean, [achievement is] certainly part of it, it's just kind of an abstract, over-your-shoulder look at it, but honestly, what really

keeps me playing EVE and subscribing is the people I've met, and the shenanigans we've gotten up to. (Participant 10)

The more I learned, the more I became fascinated by . . . not as much the mechanics, but the social interaction. That's what really got me. (Participant 6)

It's not a really relaxing game, but I just enjoy it buzzing in the background, being a big exciting pretty chatroom. (Participant 5)

I can't remember the last time I undocked my character, he's been in Jita for . . . probably a couple of years now. I play the markets more than anything else . . . made myself very rich, and sort of dole money out to my friends . . . They [play] their stuff, and I don't really [play] much anymore. I log on and it's the social aspect for me. That's all it is. (Participant 2)

I missed chat, just the simple discussion with people that I'd been friends with for years. So . . . yeah, I live on this farm, I'm an artist, I have limited social interaction with people. I have an art group that I go to once a week and so forth, but so . . . my online interactions are important to me, because they're my main social interaction. (Participant 6)

I'm a relatively emotional person, but I'm the person who, I will get angry, I will cry, I will be absolutely devastated when my internet relationships don't go well, or go downhill, or people treat me like shit suddenly, out of the blue. (Participant 5)

The convenience is so good, you know, of . . . come home from work, and you know, I don't have to have an appointment if we're going to meet somewhere at 8pm or wherever, I can get on at 9pm, I can get on at 730, I might see this friend today and don't see him tomorrow, it's just so convenient to be able to have a social life at your convenience when you're ready, and not when you're not. (Participant 1)

**My choices matter.** Participants stated that the sense of wide-ranging and meaningful choices is part of what keeps them invested in EVE compared to other games. Compared to a type of game that walks the player through a series of events towards a scripted conclusion, EVE Online offers players multiple options and focuses for approaching the game, such as combat, trade, and exploration. Players noted their appreciation of the unpredictable and unscripted nature of the player-generated content, and the ability to lose expensive assets—such as a ship that takes several months and/or billions of isk (in-game currency) to acquire—provides a sense of gravity and import to choices. An isk exchange rate allows one to assess losses in terms of real

money—an estimated thousands of dollars in some major battles—even though players rarely exchange large sums of money for isk.

The essence of what EVE is, at least in my mind . . . and it's many different things to different people . . . but the essence of what EVE represents as a sandbox is the ultimate freedom to kind of do whatever you want, right? If you want to be an industrial player, an explorer, a manufacturer, a combat pilot, a combat pilot for pay, whatever. Or maybe you just want to be a station player, and shit up local with bad scams. It's . . . I mean, there's a place for all that. But the essence of what EVE represents, I think, is embodied in wormhole space, because it is a little pocket of nullsec that roams around the galaxy, right? You hop out of that . . . honestly, you scan out your wormhole, and you get all your cosmic signatures, you have your gas sites, ore sites . . . you know, anomalies, whatever, other wormholes that lead to other wormhole chains, right, so you can . . . or empire space in lowsec . . . and it's different, every day . . . which is good, right? I mean, it keeps things fresh. It's kind of a pain in the ass, because, you know, logistics . . . are we going to be in the great wild lands in the middle of nowhere, looking for a road sign in Minmatar space, or are we going to be like three jumps out from Jita? You know? You can use . . . so you have that access to empire, and null, and lowsec, while getting to live a nomadic lifestyle, and getting to use all the best parts that make nullsec amazing, but without the bullshit attached to sovereignty. Right? So it . . . unless you really [make trouble for yourself], you can count on typically dealing with small gang warfare in wormhole space, and I think that's pretty awesome. (Participant 10)

So I mean it's kind of . . . it's emergent gameplay, and really it's not about spaceships, it's about decisions, opportunity, costs and consequence. I think. (Participant 10)

First of all, other games don't have the substance. They don't have the consequences, and the reality, and the loss, and the . . . depth, and the variety . . . (pause) . . . to me, it's a little like collectively writing the great American novel, and we're all writing it all at the same time, so it's not so much an arcade game that you throw your quarters in and you just play for a few hours, it's . . . it just . . . there's more to it than that. (Participant 11)

**Algerism.** Within the context of the sandbox environment full of choices, players have the sense that with enough time and effort, they can rise from the ranks of a rookie pilot to become the leader of a corporation in charge of hundreds (or thousands) of players. Participants spoke to the romanticism of the idea that where other games lead each character on a path to become a legendary hero, EVE players must work hard and do something extraordinary to rise above the pool of anonymous capsuleers. This common story resembles the narrative arc of the Horatio Alger novellas from the 19th century, wherein an impoverished peasant, through hard

work and self-determination, rose above his humble beginnings to become a wealthy business and/or land-owner. The Alger story went on to become a popular myth about 20th-century America—that anybody may transcend their socioeconomic status to become rich and powerful, and that to do so represents the greatest goal that one may achieve (Samuel, 2012).

It seems naive now, but then my dream was to form a corp with a group of strangers and . . . you know, make us into a band, and then a clan, and then a tribe and then a nation . . . take over a part of Nullsec. (Participant 1)

[What's compelling to me is] the idea that . . . that you *can* have an effect, and . . . like I said, something . . . if you make an effort, you can be something more than just Caldari Citizen 117536. Which in a lot of games, you are, if you play . . . all the way back to Everquest, there are one or two famous players, for the most part because there are so many servers, so many different things that you're just one of the crowd, and it's one of the running jokes that a lot of the games promise you are the chosen one who has to be . . . in the end, kill the dragon. But you look around and every person running nearby is also one of the chosen ones, there is no . . . EVE, on the other hand, says "You're a pilot, so is everybody else. Good luck with that." You know, it doesn't make . . . you want to be the chosen one, you damn well have to choose yourself. (Participant 4)

I didn't come to EVE to win or lose, I came to EVE because I'd be kind of forced to survive. The whole "oh, you know, you are the magical princess, you know." You can't sit there and be the hero . . . the world's not full of heroes, and that stuff doesn't appeal to me. I'm not very romantic by nature. So I guess to a certain extent, the realism is kind of appealing. (Participant 5)

The player could do things that wasn't determined just by how many skill points they had, or how much gold they'd collected, you understand what I mean. More than just a game icon and a set of skills that 5000 players also have. (Participant 4)

I like the cutthroat nature, and I like the fact that it was kind of no-holds-barred, you went and you lived off of whatever your personal ability and knowledge was, and anybody could attack you and take your stuff, but if you're smart, you could get it back, or do other things. I liked that about the game. (Participant 5)

**EVE relationships are meaningful.** Players described the nature and quality of their interactions with other players, and of the way their relationships in EVE develop. They described this development both among members of their own corporation, and among enemy

factions as well. Some players describe negative interactions that contribute to a toxic gaming environment, while others describe a sense of good sportsmanship among competing players.

So if you fly with people, you generally get to quote-unquote know them . . . and you know the sound of their voice, you might know . . . I don't know, did you have a shitty day at work today, what are you doing for the holidays. (Participant 10)

One night, I was a brand new guy, I had trouble completing a mission, and a guy, a Russian guy living in Vienna, came in and helped me finish it . . . and we ended up talking by chat, coms, like three or four hours . . . and, you know, he was telling me about how . . . he was really drunk at the time, but he started telling me about how he's . . . his girlfriend, they'd lost their son, and . . . and we were talking, and he's like, I don't know why I'm telling you this, and we decided together that in a game like this, you do things together, you know, and you learn to trust each other pretty quickly, because you have somebody sacrifice . . . you know, you're doing something together, this guy may sacrifice something for you, or he may not. This guy was a DJ in clubs in Vienna . . . in a club I couldn't tell anyone that story, in a club, you don't experience this little virtual danger together, so you don't get to know each other so quickly like that. (Participant 1)

Through the course of that, of getting my ships blown up by them, blowing up their ships . . . you know, over time, over some hours of that, we just got to know each other, and we're friends and enemies at the same time. (Participant 1)

[I was surprised] just how incredibly cruel people can be . . . not just blowing someone's ship up, but actually personally attack their person, and try to . . . and gang up on the person, and mock them, belittle them, and a whole . . . it can just be on a forum for people not even involved, but everybody jumps on the wagon of smack[talk]ing the guy. (Participant 1)

There were days when I just didn't bother logging on, because as I said, it's all about the social aspect for me, and in that sort of [toxic] environment, social aspect is not so hot. (Participant 2)

So, you know, I'm not a total good guy, because that's . . . what do we call it . . . non-consensual PVP . . . We have a pretty fun smacktalk war going back and forth . . . they're doing propaganda, I'm doing counter-propaganda, it's all fun, there's no . . . there's no politics or hate involved in it." (Participant 4)

A very big part of EVE, at least in my experience, has been that people always say something along the lines of 'good fight' at the end . . . I mean, seeing a lot of the news about the . . . you know, scams and betrayals and spying, and the big wars between people, I guess I didn't expect there to be that kind of respect and mutual friendliness. (Participant 9)

I found my first wormhole, hopped in, warped off to look at things, and couldn't find the exit . . . A guy, a total stranger, just pipes up in the . . . new player corp chat, 'remember what system [you started from]? I'll come and scan you out [help you find your way out].' And the whole chat[room] just explodes, 'Don't do it! Don't trust him! It's a trap!' . . . and he came, and he scanned out the wormhole, hopped in, fledged me, and I warped to him, and he's like, 'go through the wormhole. Go through the wormhole, and all's good.' . . . I offered him my meager 2 million isk that I had in my pocket, and he says 'no no, just pay it forward and help somebody out . . . In a game where the overriding message is 'trust nobody,' in order to genuinely *get* the game, to really find joy in the game, you have to trust somebody. (Participant 7)

### Self/Character Interactions

**My character and I are the same.** The explicit sense that there is no difference between the identity of the player at the keyboard and that of the avatar on the screen. Players make choices in a manner similar to how they would in real-life interactions, and construct their avatar as a reflection of themselves. Players don't consider themselves to be role-playing, and see their character only as a representation of their offline self.

It's kinda hard to separate who you are as a person from who you are in-game. (chuckles) At least it is for me. Because really, my character is just really an extension of me, with some elements sort of . . . you know, pumped up a little bit. (Participant 6)

I'm just myself. I make decisions that I'm comfortable with at the end of the day. (Participant 5)

To lots of my . . . who I'd call friends, I met them in real life, I've known them for years . . . I am still [my first character] which is the name of my first EVE character from 2004, that one was . . . They still refer to me as [my first character], they don't refer to me as [my newer character], they don't refer to me as [my name in real life], it's [my first character] for whatever we're doing. So as far as I'm concerned, I AM that character, and that character is me, even though it's female, and I'm definitely not. We are one and the same as far as I'm concerned. I act in game as I would expect to be treated in real life, I'm not like one of the . . . you know, people you see on the Crime and Punishment forums, for example, that is a standup, marvelous guy in real life but a complete prick in EVE. I treat people in EVE as I expect to be treated in real life . . . which is really kind of at odds with the general mentality of most people in EVE, but that's life, I suppose. (Participant 2)

I'm pretty much . . . in EVE I act the same way I would in real life, except we have different rules. Like I don't run around killing people in real life. Or randomly attacking them. But it's . . . what you see is what you get, so if you met me in person, you're pretty

much going to have the same experience that you're going to have online, minus the typing. (Participant 5)

Even in the early days of playing online, I found myself just much more comfortable in being who I am in real life in-game. So there really isn't a whole lot of differentiation. There is some differentiation, because it's in the nature of the social engagement. In real life, you can see people face-to-face. In real life, you can hug people, you can shake their hands. Your communications are non-verbal in many ways. It's more difficult to walk away from people in real life, whereas in EVE, if I'm just frustrated or have . . . or I'm bored or whatever, I can just log off . . . whereas in real life, like on a . . . you know, a job, an office job, you have to figure out a way to deal with those annoying people for . . . because you're obligated to . . . I mean, friends of mine tell me I'm too nice all the time. *All* the time . . . too generous . . . I can talk too much? (laughs) And that I over-explain things. (laughs) Yeah. I hear those in-game and out-of-game, you know? (laughs) And I think, ultimately, in-game, no matter how much you try and play a character, who you are at its core is still there, and comes through. (Participant 7)

I played World of Warcraft for about a year, got really bored of it. Even when I . . . I mean, my character was my character. It was somebody else, it was just a cartoony dude I looked at on-screen. In EVE—and this may be because there isn't an avatar for me to look at the back of—I *am* the guy piloting the spaceship. There's no avatar, there's no other guy, it's just me. And most of the people that you meet in EVE do feel the same way, they are that person. For instance, the guy who plays The Mittani, his name is Alexander something, I don't remember what his name is, it's public record out there . . . but the guy who plays The Mittani is known as The Mittani in almost every space. He's called The Mittani, he quit his job as a lawyer, a fairly high-paid lawyer, to be The Mittani all the time. Like he's probably the pinnacle of your in-game character being your real-life self, because he is the same person. That's just who he is. That's how a lot of people were, the exception being spies. There were a lot of spies in EVE, and their whole purpose, or whole job, was to make sure that the persona they portrayed was not the same as someone else, was not the same as the person they really were or someone else they played, so they could get into a corporation, get into an alliance, convince people to do what they wanted them to do, and then steal everything. That's kind of a spy's big thing. (Participant 8)

**My character and I are different.** The sense that there are meaningful differences between the identity of the player and that of the character within the game. Participants suggest that “it’s just a game,” and that there is a substantial difference between online and offline interactions, emphasizing differences between real and simulated violence. Participants often dissociate their character from themselves and speak of the character and his or her actions in the third person.

Uh, I am real. I have a family and a job, and I work for a hospital . . . he's a mercenary starship captain, I . . . I'm not sure we're very similar at all. I think [his personality] is a combination of game mechanics and fiction. So for example, [the Sisters of EVE faction] was interesting because, you know, they came out with these new ships, and the prices were unbelievable, so I thought I'd run missions for them and earn ships that way, and . . . But then it makes sense for him to run missions for the Sisters, because I can picture him not wanting to deal with four nation-states that can't seem to get along ever. (Participant 11)

I used to write fiction about her somewhat on again off again relationship with [another EVE character], I don't know if you've ever heard of him. Yeah, so (laughs) so it's kind of funny, because people make a lot of fun of me about his stories that he writes, because they're always very erotic, but they're like doesn't that bother you? I'm like no, it doesn't bother me, because he's not writing about ME, he's writing about my character, and I know that he's not writing about me, because I've talked to him on the phone a few times in my life. We talk to each other on email and Facebook, he's just some dude married to this really cute girl. Trust me, he's not writin' about a 57-year-old woman, okay? Hah! So it's hard, it is hard for people to separate the fiction from the potential fact sometimes. (Participant 6)

I guess part of it is just . . . in the back of my head, there's always that feeling that's just . . . it's just a game. It's not reality, it's not me. So . . . I mean I . . . it's kind of difficult to describe, you know. (Participant 9)

So there is . . . there's the [version of me] that's on coms, there's the voice that you hear in your headset or in your speakers, and there's my personality that you get to know. Right, if you're a corpmate, you'd get to know the kind of ships I fly, where do I really hang out in space, what am I going to do under pressure in a fleet, you know, that kind of thing. So if you fly with people, you generally get to quote-unquote know them . . . and you know the sound of their voice, you might know . . . I don't know, did you have a shitty day at work today, what are you doing for the holidays . . . hey, I just lost my job, hey . . . you know, you okay? Yeah, I've been drinking too much. You actually get to know these people . . . And so the [version of me] that people see on screen . . . I'm very polite in typed conversations and chat, and I . . . am very . . . selective, and very precise with murdering people. Right, so spaceship violence . . . there's like these two polar opposites. I mean I'm not going to . . . if I see you parked at a gate to a driveway, I'm not going to ram my car into you and knock you 10 kilometers and then fly up to you launching missiles into your windshield. That would be rude. (laughs) But if you're a target in EVE, that would be . . . I mean, that's like every day, right? (Participant 10)

**Parallels.** Players experience implicit similarities in their offline and online lives. Players describe thematically similar events, occupations, values, and interactions occurring in both



worlds. Some participants commented on this directly, and some did not. The following are three representative examples of this theme.

*Participant 2 on business management and aspirations.* Participant 2 described his occupation as running a small business that his father had originally started. He described spending time in EVE doing logistical and corporate management tasks, since these things tended to come easily for him.

As I said, EVE was a social thing, so if I can come into EVE and reduce everybody else's stress by doing the stuff I'm already doing in real life, why not? I liked being seen as helpful and nice, if they don't want to do the POS [player-owned space station] fueling, I'll do the POS fueling. If they don't want to do the recruiting, I'll do the API [security verification] checks. That's what I do. I'm a business owner in real life, so I deal with employees and HR and employment law, and supply ordering, and all this sort of stuff, in real life, every day, so it was just easy to do it in EVE, because I didn't have to learn anything. I just did it.

He described feeling as though his real-life job is acceptable, but wishing that he could experience working in a larger business, in a more impactful position.

I would like to get away and experience a wider career, but unfortunately nobody is looking to hire me, because I am my own reference, and unfortunately in this economic time, that's not good enough. So it looks like I will be here for some time to come. I . . . no, I just . . . it's a very pleasant existence. Not something I'm widely enthusiastic about, I have to admit, but it's something that is . . . that's my life . . . I'd just like to see if I can work for somebody else in a larger international environment. I'd like to . . . rather than paying myself, you know, peanuts, I'd like to be earning 50, 60 thousand pounds a year for a big corporation, then if I decide I don't like it, I'd go and buy my shop somewhere else.

He described how, for him, EVE was a way to experiment with feeling more effective, and connecting with a larger number of people.

I suppose that's actually one of the reasons I quite liked EVE, it's the boring drudgery of my daily life was actually useful to somebody in EVE (laughs) . . . I was looking after three or four hundred people. That's quite a lot more appealing than looking after six (laughs) . . . I felt like I was being a touch more useful than in real life. A bit more successful than in real life.

*Participant 6 on challenging closed systems.* Participant 6 described living a life where nothing was handed to her, and in which she was frequently told that as a woman, many doors would be closed to her by default.

You know when I was in high school . . . I graduated in '76, and I . . . when I was in 9th grade and we had to talk to our counselors about what high school track we were going to take . . . you know in those days, you really weren't encouraged to go to college. If there was little chance you were going to be able to afford to go to college, you weren't even encouraged to aim for it in those days, if you were a female. And my counselor said right to me, "well you're a girl, you'll probably just get married." (laughs) Believe it or not.

She described starting her career as a secretary, and at the same time, developed an interest in programming. She taught herself some basic coding, before soliciting a software company for an apprenticeship.

I sent letters to 25 (chuckles) software companies and I said "this is what I can do as a secretary, I really would like to get more into programming or some kind of technical job, and if there would be an opportunity for me to do that at your company, I'm wondering if the skills I have now would be useful while I transition into a different role." That was the essential jist of the letter. And ah . . . I got response back from one company that said we loved your letter so much that we want to hire you to come write our user documentation!

She described the appeal of EVE Online as an environment where success is never easy, and where players have to work hard to make something of themselves. This conceptualization of EVE and it's appeal to her seems to affirm her real-life worldview, and echo her personal experiences.

I was instantly enthralled (with EVE). And I don't even know why, but it was just a sense of this big mystery, you know? Because this was in 2007, and back then there was no information available. You know? It was not like it is now. And I went through the tutorials and stuff, but I was just fascinated by the fact that I could go anywhere and do anything and it wasn't really a script, and . . . I was mesmerized by spaceships.

Her response to this environment was to push back against the excluding and harsh nature of the system, being a helpful and supportive presence in the game, even as she was fighting against other players.

The fun of it for me was hunting those asteroid belts to find hapless pilots who didn't really understand what was going to happen to them in lowsec, and engaging them in combat, and taking their stuff. Heh. But I will say that I kind of became known as a nice pirate, because I'd feel really sorry for the newer players, and then so I'd talk to them about why I was able to catch them, and how they could have gotten away, and then I would give them isk to replace their ship and . . . made a lot of friendships that way, actually, over time.

***Participant 7 on catastrophe and loss.*** Participant 7 described a unique experience of a catastrophic collapse of her community and sense of accomplishment both in her real life and in EVE. Within the game, she described helping build a small corporation in the untamed frontier of wormhole space, then losing this territory to invaders some time later:

It was a small corporation, and just kind of figuring things out on their own, as they were going along, and the CEO went inactive after a few months, and I became . . . I'm constantly organizing people. And so even the older players didn't know much about wormhole space back then, we're having to constantly teach, and I really found myself *totally* digging how to share my knowledge and learn at the same time from them in the process of teaching.

Our wormhole home—our home, that we were immensely proud of holding, just this small little group, we were about 15 or 20 people holding down the fort in the wormhole, a single wormhole for almost 2 years—was under siege and losing it . . . the morale was incredibly low.

She described a similar process occurring in her real life, as her home was struck by a natural disaster:

I was dealing with a real-life house collapse, partial collapse. And the loss of everything that I had spent the prior 12 years working to build. My own house, my business, just . . . yeah. (laughs) There was a bit of a natural disaster in the small town I lived in Eastern Colorado, we had this big polar vortex swing down over part of the country, negative 40-degree temperature for three days. The pipes froze everywhere, the town's pipes froze, and then thawed, and of course the foundation got flooded, I had a partial basement that got flooded, and then the vortex ran down again and we got hit again with the hard freeze, this time it was like negative 25, for 2 days, and thawed again, and then my partial

basement, the wall imploded. And my kitchen sunk 3 feet . . . I ended up having to throw away most everything I owned, anything that was fabric . . . furniture . . . because mold was just so aggressive.

She moved back and forth between these two stories with some fluidity, indicating a parallel process between the two identities:

So as I was fighting to get back on my feet in real life, I was fighting to get our corporation back on its feet in-game.

**Time commitment creates friction.** Players describe instances where their investment in EVE creates tension with their offline lives, particularly in terms of time commitments. Some players lament not being able to play as much as they want to, because they have less free-time than they've had in the past.

I think my husband had some real concerns about where [my involvement with EVE] was going to end up. I . . . you know, to me, I was in [a major role] for a year-long term, and for me when the term was over, I was going to be done with it and go back to being a normal EVE player, but I think leading up to that, I was spending way too much time in EVE already, and it was starting to bother him. (Participant 6)

It's taken . . . this takes a lot of time, and there are times where there's tension in the house because I'm spending too much time on that damn game, but it's also nice to have something to distract myself with. (Participant 4)

I had two kids by then, I was getting to the point . . . so when we were out in null security space, there's a thing called alarm clock fleets. In order to better destroy the enemy base or whatever, they would want to be online a specific time, and that specific time would often be something like 1am my time, or 2am my time, and I had a baby at the time, and my wife wanted me to come to bed, and I had to get up with the baby and stuff like that. So I tried to sort of work it around, where oh okay, I'll get up at 1 in the morning when the baby gets up, because that's fine, and I'll get on with this alarm clock fleet, but if she didn't get up at that time, I still had to be on there. And then I would have no sleep, because I'd go to bed, and she'd be waking up immediately, so I'd have no sleep. And that really started affecting my mood, and my ability to spend time with my kids and my wife, and . . . yeah, it was sort of a big deal. I mean there was no reason to have that much of a connection to a game where I'd get up at 1, 2 in the morning just to go blow up someone else's imaginary space station. (Participant 8)

It starts to feel like work when it starts to demand more time than I want to give it. I'm really careful to control how much time I give to EVE. When I was in the CSM [Counsel for Stellar Management, a player-elected representative group that interacts with the

game developers] in 2010, EVE consumed my life, and I didn't like it then, and I resolved when I returned that I wasn't going to let it happen again. Now, that's been . . . it was challenging the first month or so of [the corporation I was in at the time] because there was so much to do. But I could see, you know, sort of an endpoint to that, of all the little million things you have to . . . the policies and the structures you have to put in place, and all that kind of stuff . . . to enable communication among your members, and to steer people in the direction that you want the corp to head and so forth. So that's leveled out now, and now I am very capable of . . . of not spending more than an hour a day on EVE stuff. Sometimes that means I spend an hour a day answering emails. Sometimes it means I undock my ship and go have something fun, and sometimes I spend an hour doing convos with people, or in . . . just other admin stuff, you know, for the corp, or I write walls of text for ideas I have for contests, or activities, you know. Any of that stuff could feel like a job, but it's . . . to me, and I don't mind doing those, some of those things I enjoy, especially because they have an objective, they're part of a bigger goal, and so they're just things that need to be done to get to that goal. But as long as it's not taking up five hours of my day, then that's great. (Participant 6)

**One identity learning from the other.** Players describe ways in which their offline sense of self benefits from their time spent in EVE. Some players describe acquiring a certain skill, trying on a new behavior, or being able to practice a particular way of interacting with others, in a way that generalizes to their offline experience. Other players describe being able to access a certain feeling, such as feeling respected and appreciated by their peers, that may be lacking in offline interactions.

Yeah, [in EVE] I was looking after three or four hundred people. That's quite a lot more appealing than looking after six [in my real-life job] (laughs) . . . so yes, I suppose that aspect of EVE did appeal, with the work aspect of EVE did appeal, because I felt I was being just a touch more useful than in real life. A bit more successful than in real life. (Participant 2)

I think it was a place where I had just started working, not too long ago, and they do birthday parties and somebody has a birthday, and my birthday was coming up, and I walked in and my gosh, I hope they don't do that birthday party thing and sing happy birthday and all that, but they sure did, and I barely knew them . . . and so I go okay, instead of being your . . . [my offline self] the shy guy, let's go more towards [my online self] the forum's funny guy. (Participant 1)

I think that I have learned through my interactions in the game with other people to be more patient in finding out all the things you need to know before making a decision. Rather than just making rash decisions, you know? I mean that first event with making the decision to leave my first husband was a big piece of that part of my personality, but

I'm . . . it might have made me become too decisive. And what happens in the game is, you know, I do sort of have this little mental . . . thing running in the back of my mind, a little ticker reminding me it is just a game. And I do . . . I have in the past, sometimes, tended to be very decisive and just put my foot down, and say you know what, I'm not putting up with your shit, bye, and kicking people out of my corp (chuckles). But my experience with the folks that I'm partners with in the Signal Cartel endeavor are very different from me, and they are two extremely interesting guys. They are so generous-spirited and nice, and human . . . I mean, they're so tuned-in to what is the humane way to do things, that they're beginning to affect how I behave toward other people when I'm in decision-making mode. Isn't that crazy? Not just in the game, but in real life too. (Participant 6)

It was actually something that I noticed as a very interesting parallel between EVE and my real life. Again, I've been out of EVE for a long time, but all the things that I've learned in it keep cropping up. One of them is while in EVE, I got sort of thrust into a larger leadership role than I was used to, and did my best at it for a while, but learned a few things from it. And in my work, I was recently asked, because I'm decent at speaking, apparently, to people and manipulating them and getting them to sort of do what I want . . . I was asked to be part of a negotiation group for our budget negotiation . . . sort of deal. Because we're not part of a union, we're part of a separate budget negotiation group, or bargaining group, and I was asked to be part of that. I was able to talk to the head of HR for our entire school district and get him to give us a larger raise than he's given . . . actually than any HR person in his position has given for the last probably seven years. They were so impressed by that that they made me president of the group. So I'm now the president a bargaining group, which I've never done before, and have had no training or experience to do so, but they decided that I was good at, and they elected me president. It was very similar to what happened in EVE, is that I was able to chat with people and get people to sort of get on my side, and so out of nowhere, people just elected me as this higher leader of a bigger group that I wasn't really used to or experienced at, but I did my best at anyway, and . . . yeah. I've taken some of the things I've learned in EVE and sort of applied them to being president of this group, and it's been fairly effective. (Participant 8)

Because I was so isolated in Agony [corporation] for so long, and in wormhole space for so long. I didn't even know how many people knew me from wormhole space, just from people, you know, that I'd fought with, answered questions on forum threads, or had met me through Agony classes and joined our wormhole, and I had no clue how many . . . how many . . . the lives, of EVE lives of how many people I'd affected . . . You know, when you lose everything that you've busted our ass for, it can be hard to get motivated to rebuild, and hard to find meaning at times, and things. Especially like, you know, things that you're supposed to find meaning in. Social goals, such as owning a house. Getting married, having kids, whatever. It's freed me in many ways, though, from some of those expectations, because of the recognition that everything you have can be lost right now, so living in the moment is something I've always relished, and living life on my own terms has always been a key element of my personality. But I have—thanks to the game, in particular, this last year and a half, since I struck out on my own—a great deal more

confidence, a greater confidence in my leadership ability, in trusting my own instincts, in particular. Trusting my own instincts, and I've been good at trusting my own instincts throughout life, but now I have a great deal more confidence in trusting my own instincts . . . and doing crazy things that others look at you and just go "what the . . . why would you do that?" Such as, you know, I'm now 50 years old, living in an RV (laughs) you know? It's just kind of every six months or year going someplace else. Just working however little or however much I need to for whatever I have to pay, living for cheap and stuff. So yeah! It's . . . probably the number one change is I don't really explain myself anymore. Because I don't have to explain myself. I'm under no obligation to, and that is a really . . . probably the biggest change. (Participant 7)

**Intersections.** Players describe ambiguity in distinguishing the offline self from the online self, and describe instances in which these selves intersect. Players describe overlaps and similarities in their skillsets and interests. Players describe their experiences of Fanfest, an annual EVE convention, where online and offline selves collide more explicitly.

So what the old sovereignty-holding alliances used to do, is you've got the holder corp, and then you've got all the main corps underneath that, and then each of the corps would be given a section of the alliance space to look after and maintain, and you'd have to look after the POS network, and the jump bridge network in that . . . make sure they're all fueled, and this is in the days before fuel blocks were a thing, so yeah. It was fun, we used to have dedicated calculators for that sort of stuff. Really appeals to the accountant in me . . . someone's got to do it, and I do it in real life. There you go. (laughs) It was . . . as I said, EVE was a social thing, so if I can come into EVE and reduce everybody else's stress by doing the stuff I'm already doing in real life, why not? I liked being seen as helpful and nice, if they don't want to do the POS fueling, I'll do the POS fueling. If they don't want to do the recruiting, I'll do the API checks. That's what I do. I'm a business owner in real life, so I deal with employees and HR and employment law, and supply ordering, and all this sort of stuff, in real life, every day, so it was just easy to do it in EVE, because I didn't have to learn anything. I just did it. I'm in a fuckin' space ship, it's not work! (Participant 2)

If anything happened in the game, there's a good chance that I talked about it in real life to somebody who was also in the game, and . . . yeah, so that line got real blurry there for a while. I mean I would go to work and there were many times where on a shift at work . . . because I became a manager at work for a little while there . . . there were many times where during a shift at work, every single employee who was with me on that day while I was closing the store was part of my corporation, and we would have a corporate meeting at work. There were times when we would go to a bar, me and just other friends of mine, and we would have corporate meetings there . . . corporate meaning in-game corporation, not a real corporation . . . but we would go to a bar, have meetings there, chat about what sounded like very serious matters and felt like very serious matters, but in the end, was just a video game. (Participant 8)

I mean, what's on my mind is not just what's happening in the game that's controlled by game mechanics, and which . . . you know . . . however creatively you want to do it, you could explain within the context of the game story . . . but you're also thinking about the player who's playing, you know, and I think one of the reasons that happens is when you've gotten to know a lot of players by being on coms with them, or being in chats where you really get to know people, you . . . not necessarily the person you're fighting or killing, but you just are more tuned-in to the fact that it's a person there. Everything in EVE is hard to get, you know, unless you're one of those people who goes and buys a bunch of PLEX and just, you know . . . has more money than sense. If you're really working for isk in the game, you know you realize how much effort someone probably may have put in to get—especially newer players—to get that ship. I mean, I remember how hard my first character worked to get her first Thorax, and that's the ship blown up by pirates. I was pissed when that happened, and I was also stunned, because I didn't expect it, and . . . so that human angle, the human emotion cannot be discounted in this game. I don't play other games, so I have no idea if anything like this happens in any other game, but I don't think it does. (Participant 6)

I wound up at one point . . . it was funny, I got to go to Fanfest . . . and I was just meeting people who I'd chatted with online and never had a chance to meet their EVE player live, and then all of a sudden you're in a building with a bunch of them. And just getting hugs from people I've never met before and that sort of thing. One guy was funny, he tweeted "I saw Mike, but he was so busy talking I couldn't get a word in edgewise," and it's funny because the guy who wrote that's called Noisy Gamer. And so I tweeted back "well we know who the noisy one is now, don't we?" But I realized that I'd been holding court, almost, and . . . it was kind of what, in my . . . if you read the blog, it's what my character does a lot of, is wind up asking questions, but then taking over the conversations. Yeah, that was more him than me (laughs). It was kind of cool, but my wife tells me I do it when I'm nervous. Like I said, storytelling, it's easier to control the conversation, but to a certain extent, usually I try not to do that, because it is too . . . self-centered. You've got to be really egotistical to take over and say I'm the center of attention, the rest of you may listen if you wish . . . Usually I try to engage and listen, but that time, I just was totally in expound mode. (Participant 4)

## Moral Dilemmas

**My prosocial choices.** Players describe their approach to morality within EVE in which they make deliberate efforts to be honest, respectable, or helpful. They describe their motivation and thought processes behind making these choices, and how their values are similar between online and offline contexts.

When I'm playing right now, I'm doing Operation Magic School Bus, which is a charity for new players, where I fit newbro ships and travel to the 12 new player destinations,



and . . . they're called the career agencies (??) and advertise, "for the next 10 minutes, I will give anyone a free fitted ship. All you have to do is speak up here in local and dock up to receive the ship." Then I have fun taunting them as they all go, "It's got to be a scam," and I go, "Ooh, scary man, hide. Everybody hide!" And the few that do do it found out I'm real, and doing this not with my own isk, but with . . . going back to what I was talking about before, you know, you get to be the chosen one if you make the effort to it? I chose not to be a bad guy. The game where most people choose to be bad guys, and I'm at a point now where I ask for a donation to the Magic School Bus, and the first person handed me a billion. Because I have a rep as doing what I say . . . you know, I don't screw people around, I don't do scams. And I've been in the game long enough that people will hand me isk to do good things with. So . . . but that's how I play it.

(Participant 4)

I was a scout, actually is what I did. I just went out there and looked for things for people and tried to make bookmarks for people so they could warp into the right location . . . After that, I got into mining, there's just a nice chill way to play the game, and after that . . . oh, what did we do. We went to low security space and null security space, and the whole while I kind of had a scout mentality, a scout basis . . . but I just tried to make sure people were safe. I was never into pirating, although a lot of my friends were. I tried to make sure that people were safe from pirates, but . . . a lot of people like to be pirates in that game, it's a big thing. (Participant 8)

Everybody seems to be fascinated with PVP, and . . . they get pretty fired up, and . . . and that's cool. I like to help out more than I like to do PVP stuff . . . With EVE, most of the combat happens before you press the fire button. Most of it is the fitting window, in memorizing what . . . whether railguns or blasters will fit by just looking at them. A lot of it's twitch, and then it's over really, really, really fast . . . and you tend to lose a lot, so I hate that. I don't like that, so I'd rather help out my team, and keep people alive, and win . . . even if we're fighting up a weight class. (Participant 11)

When I went to college, I took some courses on philosophy of religion, and that . . . that changed my whole life, and I don't know if that . . . that may have affected some of the ways that I played EVE. Because I became a pacifist, I became a Buddhist, actually, and as a Buddhist, I wanted to be very kind to everyone, and so the way I played EVE, I never became a pirate, even though in other games I had been someone of ill-repute, I suppose, someone who didn't really make other people's game as fun as it could be. (Participant 8)

When I play Diablo 3, I always play hardcore. When I play Minecraft, I play survival mode. As soon as you screw up, you pay a huge price for screwing up. One time through, even Guild Wars, I work really hard to get survivor ticket, which means you make the first 20 or 30 levels without dying once. And in some games, you know, they have these as an acknowledgement. It is easy to slip and do bad things, it's very hard to never slip. So I like playing the game the hard way, I'm a tourist, and it's . . . it's easy to just randomly shoot people or screw them over. It's a lot harder to be a good guy in a game where everybody is encouraged to be a bad guy. So I like the challenge. I think that's the

best way to put it, is I like the challenge of being known as being known as a carebear, being known as somebody who will go out, I will shoot people, I'll roam with the fleet, but that's . . . but I won't purposely cheat anybody, and . . . you know, I even ran my campaigns that way, where I don't down-talk, I don't fling mud. I ran a straight-forward campaign, saying "this is what I am, if you don't like me, I can recommend other guys who are different than me you can vote for," and I actually did. In previous campaigns, I (cuts out) . . . and I recommend my competition, saying "you're looking for someone to represent you in PVP, I'm not it. That guy over there is." So . . . but yeah, it's . . . I like the challenge of doing good in a game that encourages bad, that actually has, as one of their taglines, "be the villain." But have you ever . . . EVE has never had a tagline "be the hero." But that means that . . . you know, I'm taking the path less-walked. (Participant 4)

Well the negative aspects was a bit of a turnoff for me, I have no interest in scamming people. You know, it's a game. People log into games to escape, to get enjoyment, to better themselves in some form or fashion, however it's perceived . . . you know, whether it's real or not . . . to challenge themselves, to entertain themselves. And while I recognize that—and actually, rather enjoy that aspect of EVE, and that you CAN get scammed, and there are people who get enjoyment out of this—it's not something I personally want to do to others. And over the years, I've actually developed quite the reputation for being the helpful, trusted one (laughs) (Participant 7)

**Someone else's antisocial choices.** Players describe taking advantage of the moral ambiguity of EVE, and engage in piracy, theft, scamming, or griefing other players. These behaviors are generally discussed as separate from the player—either as something that other players engage in, or something that is ascribed to the character, and not to the player herself.

That whole bad guy [mentality] . . . I just wanted to explore that whole side of the game . . . I think it was the hunter . . . it was the hunt. The hunt for targets . . . So I joined a pirate corp in a system called Deacon, which is in a little pocket of two lowsec systems surrounded by highsec, and we never left Deacon. We didn't roam, we just sat there and killed people who came in. But the fun of it for me was hunting those asteroid belts to find hapless pilots who didn't really understand what was going to happen to them in lowsec, and engaging them in combat, and taking their stuff. Heh. But I will say that I kind of became known as a nice pirate, because I'd feel really sorry for the newer players, and then so I'd talk to them about why I was able to catch them, and how they could have gotten away, and then I would give them isk to replace their ship. (Participant 6)

What's really . . . heh . . . kinda jacked up about it, is that I've infiltrated other corps, but on a different character, and stolen everything they owned, just to see if I could do it. And what was really really really surprising was that I felt really bad . . . because it was . . . EVE is only a video game, but it is totally like . . . you're emotionally invested, whether you realize it or not . . . because you could have one friend, you know, you could be leading an alliance, and sending out these all-encompassing broadcast messages, and

directing fleets and controlling sovereignty, or you could just be playing, you know, hey dude, let's go on a lowsec roam with that guy from work. It could be any degree of casual or serious, but you care. If you're still playing EVE after six months to a year, and you actually know what your skill plan is going to be next March . . . let's be real there, so those people probably care. So knowing what it takes to have perfectly-researched T2 blueprints just ripped from your grasp because you forgot to set somebody's permissions, or maybe you trusted somebody that you shouldn't . . . that's heart-wrenching, because they're very finite, and they're very precious, and it really has an impact. So . . . I mean, there's that. It was interesting, because I . . . you know, [my character] the space mercenary is a cold, heartless bitch with sleeve tattoos, and I am . . . not that. But I'm not . . . I don't know, I actually felt bad. I told my wife . . . I was like dude, you will not guess what I just did. And she's like "What?" "I just stole, you know, 45 billion [isk] worth of implants . . . or, excuse me, blueprints." She was like, "From who?" And I'm like, "Oh, no, in EVE, I didn't actually steal . . . whatever." And she was like, "Okay," and she went back to reading her book. And I was like, okay, whatever, the cat looked at me like I was retarded, and I came back into my office, and I was like . . . (laughs) . . . okay, well . . . I had two characters in that corporation, so the character that stole everything and left, I . . . the character went to Jita and just dropped everything in a hangar and logged off. Dropped core, whatever, just went into stealth mode, right? The other character that was in there was like "I don't know what happened, did you see so-and-so?" I get to watch all this drama unfold, and there were like people who were like "fuck this, I'm quitting EVE, I can't believe that we just worked for fucking two goddamn years to get that shit, and some . . . you fucking didn't give him roles, and he stole it." So it created this like huge conflict, and I . . . I got over the "oh man, I really did that," and I had a pretty good laugh about it, but it was . . . I don't know, I mean, they were butt hurt. Like . . . and I mean, it's cool, whatever, what'd they expect, right? (Participant 10)

I mean, you hear plenty about how gamers are brutally hard against each other, and how EVE in particular is really well known for people being . . . just assholes to each other. (Participant 9)

**Morality is ambiguous.** Participants comment on moral ambivalence, and the unique characteristics of the EVE environment that makes moral decisions compelling. Participants speak of their assumptions about other people, and the way other people make choices.

How much would you interact with mortals down on the planet if you are plugged into a spaceship? You know, and how would they respond? What would be their opinions of you? You're this guy who can afford to buy, like . . . Bill Gates can probably—he's not allowed to—but he can probably afford to buy an aircraft carrier. What would happen if he was allowed to buy them? Or the super-rich were allowed to have battleships? That's what this is, in the space-game, is you have these . . . ridiculously rich people. Even the poorest capsuleer is so far above and beyond any planetary ground-pounder, especially a Dusk [Dusk 513, a first-person shooter set in the EVE universe] player, for example. They brought that in to start looking at it, where they can barely afford their tank if they

save up a ton, or their battlesuit, and I'm tossing around . . . I need to buy a battleship that can carry them and all their stuff and their little dog Toto too. So it's neat to ask what would happen, how would it change your outlook, and how many people start thinking they're gods? I think to a certain extent, some of them literally don't . . . you have some people who forget there's even crews on their ships. And I don't know if you know that: if you fly, like a battlecruiser, you've got 1000 people in that ship with you, so if you die, you respawn. They're not capsuleers, you've just killed 1000 people. (Participant 4)

So in EVE, you can pretty much kind of do whatever you want, I mean you can be a complete jerk, you can be the good guy, I guess, depending on how you look at that or twist it. But there's no . . . so if I want to manipulate and crash a market, the SEC is not going to come barging into my spaceship room and take me off to space jail. There's . . . it's pretty much an unregulated sandbox, and so you're free to do a lot of pretty much whatever you want within it, and I think that's pretty awesome. (Participant 10)

I don't particularly consider myself like a nice person in real life. I am, I'm a very rule-abiding person, I don't do anything wrong or anything like that, I don't feel the need to like attack people personally, but life is cutthroat, you know. Anything that you do is about you pay your rent, you buy a house, you . . . [let's] use houses: if you're buying a house and somebody else wants the house, you're outbidding them for the house, you're trying to figure out how you can get something that you want that someone else has, but you play within the rule set that exists. In EVE I don't have a rule set of having to . . . I guess not be combative, but I don't particularly enjoy hurting people. And it IS a video game, but the video game hurting people is very different from real-life hurting someone. In real life, if I steal your car (laughs) you know, I'm going to very much hurt you. In EVE if I steal your spaceship, I'm going to inconvenience you, and it doesn't have the same moral checks. But if it had the same moral checks in EVE, then I would follow the same moral checks. And so I'm kind of a rules-follower, but I'm not stuck in real-life versus video game. (Participant 5)

## **Emotional Content**

Players describe their experience of EVE Online using a wide range of emotional language, including grief, pride, sadness, betrayal, embarrassment, and others.

But there was a lot of dismissal, there was a lot of, you know, oh, you're only in lowsec because you're bad, you're only in lowsec because you can't make it in null, lowsec sucks, there's no reason to be there, you know, only horrible people are in lowsec, so there's all this negativity, and I have very major knee-jerk reactions to people telling me how things are, that never goes down very well. (Participant 7)

I love this, teaching the basic classes. Love that whole, people getting addic— . . . saying, "oh my god, my hands are shaking!" You know? (laughs) I use the word love a lot, obviously. (Participant 7)

. . . It was one of those moments when someone's treating you very very badly, and I have . . . I don't believe in letting people treat other people like shit, because I've been bullied an awful lot, so I try not to let that happen, and I'm in like my corp chat, and pretty much you see everyone turning their heads, like oh, we don' see it, it's not really happening . . . Or defending him, that's my favorite. He's like ripping into me, and they're like, well, he's not being polite, but the points he's making . . . and I'm like, are you shitting me?! That actually made me leave my corporation. I left super upset, it was like a bad breakup, and it took me like a month to get the courage to leave, because I didn't think anybody would want me, because my corp said I was useless. (Participant 5)

I'll never forget my biggest loss; I was doing only missioning at the time, and I had a CNR . . . a Raven Navy Issue . . . and I had a Tengu, and I forget which one I lost first, but I . . . you know, with kids, you know, threw a tantrum or whatever, and I had to get up right away, and this mission killed me. I was so mad that I took this next most expensive thing I had, and brought it back in to loot the wreck and lost it too. That was . . . that was bad . . . that's . . . you know, a couple months worth of work! Gone quickly. (Participant 11)

### **Personal Experience**

My initial reaction to EVE Online was to feel mesmerized and overwhelmed by the sense of scale in the game; the way that a small frigate was dwarfed by a much larger battleship, which in turn appeared tiny as it approached an enormous structure such as a space station or jump gate.

For the first two months that I played, I felt compelled by the prospect of being able to pilot the next largest ship; I ran dozens of player-versus-environment (PVE) missions to gain the money necessary to afford a larger ship while my skill points slowly increased. My interest in PVE waned, due to the repetitive nature of the missions: jump to a location three systems away, destroy the ships there (controlled by unsophisticated AI), return to station, repeat.

My most satisfying experiences with the game were the handful of times that I played cooperatively with other players; several times with just one other player, and once in a large fleet with about two dozen other ships. Participating in a fleet, roaming around null-security space looking for trouble like a mischievous school of fish, added a layer of comradery and vitality that the single-player approach to the game severely lacked; this is consistent with the

above theme of the Importance of Social Interaction. Due to myriad time commitments, I found it difficult to engage with any group regularly, and thus ended spending the majority of my game time alone.

I never thought of my character as a separate entity from me, despite having a different name and physical appearance. I was aware of wanting to protect my reputation in the game, as my character's actions felt to me like an unambiguous reflection on my own identity. My initial intention was to immerse myself as soon as possible into an established corporation of players; however, I noticed that I had a strong reluctance to engage with other players until I felt that I had a strong grasp on the game and its mechanics. I didn't want to enter as a clueless novice; rather, I wanted to be seen as a knowledgeable asset, and invested my time in learning as much as I could from the single-player experience.

I realized that this was remarkably consistent with ways that I approach other situations in my life—a new card game, a new job, a new group of people—where I tend to keep myself at a watchful distance, observing until I feel as though I have a grasp on the situation, so that when I finally engage, I can be seen as knowledgeable and competent. In this way, my experience with EVE Online recreated a way that I experience myself in offline contexts, consistent with the themes of *Parallels*, and *My Character and I Are the Same*.

## Chapter VI: Discussion

This study was conducted in order to elucidate how players in MMO communities understand and engage with their online experiences, and how online and offline identities interact. Research on identity and online gaming has so far focused on games where the player is visually represented by a highly customizable humanoid avatar. The current research was designed to explore how players experience the boundary between online and offline selves in an environment where the visual representation of the player is deemphasized.

My personal experience with the EVE allowed me to contextualize the participants' experiences, and allowed our conversations to focus more on their thoughts and feelings about specific events, spending less time simply describing what the game is about.

The theme of My Character and I Are the Same was evenly distributed across all interviews; each participant made at least one statement or described one experience of personally identifying with their character. Most—but not all—of participants made statements consistent with the opposite theme, My Character and I Are Different. In many of the latter cases, the participant would describe their character as a separate and distinct individual, but after discussing the differences, these participants would concede that there are important parallels and similarities in personality, motivation, and roles.

While these themes would appear to contradict one another, both are true for most participants; my character and I are the same, and yet different. There is substantial overlap between the identities of player and character—even in participants who assert the separation of each identity. There is also at least a small degree of difference—even for participants who assert that each identity is the same.

The distinction between participants who initially assert the sameness between self and character, compared to those who tended to assert the difference and separation, is related to whether or not the participant generally interacted with the game in ways that are ego-syntonic. Participants who asserted a difference between the self and the character appeared to be making a conscious effort to behave in a way that feels different to them, whether that meant being more outgoing and affable, or engaging in piracy or other morally dubious behaviors. Both assertions, my character and I are the same or different, represent an engagement with questions of identity, morality, and values: what does it mean to be me; how do I want others to see me; what values do I want to enact in morally ambiguous situations?

The offline self informs the online character, who in turn exists as an abstract representation of the offline self. Participants who described multiple characters seemed to be talking about different personas or parts of self: the professional side, the playful side, etc. In addition to a social outlet and an aesthetically attractive pastime, participants' engagement with EVE is a meaningful self-expression. The online character becomes a vehicle for a part of the self that is gregarious, adventurous, a strong leader, a successful manager, generous, helpful, playful, or reserved; qualities that may be may be unexpressed, undernourished, or expressed in a different way in the player's day-to-day life.

### **Current Research**

Steinkuehler and Williams' (2006) work on virtual spaces serving as "third places" away from home and work overlapped significantly with the present study, in which all participants spoke to some degree about the social nature of the game being a primary draw for them, and the relationships being more important than the game itself. Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell (2009) articulated some skepticism about the quality of these relationships, framing them as mutual



audiences for one another's exploits more than actual friendships. This contrasts with the theme of EVE Relationships are Meaningful within the present study, in which players describe meaningful and lasting relationships occurring within the virtual world. Participants described many instances in which the gameplay in EVE is boring or tedious; during these times, players aren't looking for someone to witness their completion of tedious tasks, but are finding companionship and building relationships in the midst of the busy work. Participant 5 stated that he sees the game primarily as a communication medium, and secondarily as a game: "I just enjoy [the game] buzzing in the background, being a big exciting pretty chatroom."

The themes of My Choices Matter and Algerism both represent concepts similar to Yee's (2006) motivation of Advancement, or the desire to gain in-game power or status, and also with Przybylsky, Rigby, and Ryan's (2010) motivation of a desire for feeling competent. While consistent with these authors, the current data emphasizes the importance of the context in which that achievement takes place. Players described how their choices gained value and importance by the sense of stakes and loss involved in EVE Online. Players invest a great deal of time and energy into their in-game careers, in an environment where nothing comes easily, and success is not handed to the player. Players described a system in which heroism and fame aren't taken for granted; the emergent gameplay and limited restrictions by developers allow for the possibility of any one player rising up from ambiguity and taking control of large swaths of the universe. EVE Online is unique among other MMOs in its reproduction and reinforcement of the rugged individualist, capitalist structure described by the stories of Horatio Alger.

The concept of being able to rise to the top of the galactic food chain was something that many players identified as an aspect that sets EVE apart from other MMOs. Participant 8 described a moment of disillusionment with this system; he had initially fantasized about gaining

a great deal of power and control in the game, but realized that doing so would require an investment of time, energy, and resources that few players can afford. He pointed out that even after someone rises to the top, another group of players is waiting to usurp their control. Participant 7 spoke to the idea that as the player base increases, there are fewer opportunities for a small group of players to claim ownership of an area of the map to call home, and the oldest and largest player alliances in the game are unlikely to be overthrown.

Although the methodologies are different, the theme of My Character and I Are the Same is mutually confirming with Hamilton (2009) and Vasalou and Joinson (2009) in that players tend to identify with their characters because the latter represents the player's agency and participation within the game world. Participants in the present study, even when asserting that their character is a completely separate identity from themselves, would struggle to separate themselves fully from their character, and would refer to their character as "I."

With the theme of My Character and I Are Different, participants would vocalize a clear distinction between themselves and their character, identifying their avatar as definitely "not myself." When trying to differentiate between self and character, some participants would use very concrete terms: "I am real. I have a family, and a job, and I work for a hospital . . . he's a mercenary starship captain, I'm not sure we're very similar at all. (Participant 11)" Others would attempt to name characteristics that differentiated the two identities, although these characteristics tended to be very similar: "Myself in person, I'm fairly quiet, and with my friends I'm, you know, kind of an irreverent joker, but in the workplace, I'm a pretty low-key, quiet person . . . [my character] is a joker, and kind of a wiseguy, but in a nice way." These other characteristics and other selves appear to be extrapolations or exaggerations of participants' own personality traits; this theme in the present research overlaps with Williams et al.'s (2001)

description of online spaces as a place to express parts of self that may be unexpressed in other contexts. The way that these participants dissociate themselves from the behaviors or actions of their characters suggests that these parts of the player's identity are not just unexpressed but also not acceptable into the player's consciousness. There may be a part of the player that wants to engage in aggressive, hostile behavior, but as the player acts on them, they are separated from the self as not-me.

Within each interview, parallel themes emerged between a participants' online and offline experiences. The content and meaning of these parallels differed between participants, but there was always some sort of similarity either between the way participants understood themselves in both contexts, prominent aspects of their identity that came to the fore, similar ideas being explored in both contexts, or even similar events happening online and offline. There is some overlap with the theme of My Character and I Are the Same, in that players may be describing their own personality existing in two different contexts. In other instances, the Parallel theme appeared to represent the participant expressing, processing, and understanding or working through something about their real life within the EVE world, again similar to Williams et al. (2001). Participant 7, described in detail above, was particularly interesting in that she would fluidly move back and forth between her stories about her online and offline catastrophes:

And I had to abandon my house. And during the worst of this, as it turns out, our wormhole home—our home, that we were immensely proud of holding, just this small little group, we were about 15 or 20 people holding down the fort in the wormhole, a single wormhole for almost 2 years—was under siege and losing it. And I ended up having to throw away most everything I owned, anything that was fabric . . . furniture . . . because mold just was so aggressive.

Participant 7 speaks of her loss within EVE and in real life as though they are the same incident, and the same loss. In the same way that the loss in each space affected her negatively, her

recovery within EVE appears to have helped her gain a sense of mastery over her real-life loss as well.

The current theme of One Identity Learning From the Other is consistent with Yee et al.'s (2009) concept of the Proteus Effect. In each study, participants experience a novel aspect of themselves within the virtual environment, and then are able to enact or embody that aspect in subsequent face-to-face encounters.

Within the category of Morality, many participants in the current research asserted that they respond to the moral ambiguity of EVE by taking the high road, noting that they hold similar moral values online to offline. When participants would talk about antisocial behaviors, they either to refer to a nebulous “everyone else,” or as being an action taken by the character, not the player. When players did take ownership for violent or antisocial behaviors, they would describe their actions as couched in a greater prosocial goal, such as protecting their friends or helping new players learn the ropes. In this domain, the current literature seems to agree with Gitter et al. (2013), in that the prosocial context of the violent actions appears to be more meaningful to the player than the violence itself. The current data on morality is also reminiscent of the Social Psychology concept of the fundamental attribution error, or the tendency to attribute the actions of others to internal rather than external factors (Ross, 1977). The current participants may view the actions of others as morally dubious and their own actions as justifiable or exceptional; perhaps a third observer would view the current participants' behavior as antisocial as well.

Participant 10 described an instance of engaging in a behavior that was morally appalling to him—the theft of thousands of dollars worth of in-game assets from a corporate bank. As he spoke, he seemed to be actively struggling with the consequences and meaning of this action. He

stated that he was surprised by how bad he felt; even though they were in-game assets, not purchased with actual money, the items represented months or years of work and investment within the game for a whole group of players. In describing his surprise that he would do this, he would oscillate between guilt and blaming the victims for essentially leaving the door unlocked. He had similar uncertainty in describing where he the player stopped and the character began; he described believing that his actions represented the character, while his voice communication—his mode of socializing with other players—was himself. This distinction became muddy after the major theft, since he was no longer able to contact his friends within the burglarized corporation.

Across all participants in this study, engagement with EVE Online involved an active exploration of the self and its relationship to society. Players exercise different masks and different parts of themselves in different contexts. They confront moral ambiguity, trying to identify, understand, and enact certain values in the absence of an external moderator. They celebrate victories, enjoy companionship, and cope with real and perceived loss. These explorations often exist in parallel with similar explorations in players' real lives, and the EVE environment allows them to understand or gain mastery over certain experiences or parts of self in a novel and unique way.

### **Limitations and Recommendations**

A major limitation of the current study is the homogeneity of the sample in terms of attitudes about the game. Each participant spoke in some way about the way EVE Online is known for antisocial behavior, and saw themselves as an exception to this rule. This could be an artifact of those participants who agreed to participate in the study being predisposed to helpful and cooperative behaviors, or it could be that scamming, griefing, and other antisocial behaviors

come from a minority of EVE Online players. A future study might attempt to directly recruit scammers from the new-pilot systems that these players tend to operate in.

## **Conclusion**

Psychological literature about video game play has shifted over the last ten years from primarily addiction-based or violence-causation frameworks to a more nuanced exploration of the meaning and function of gaming for players. The creation and embodiment of an in-game avatar can be an exercise in identity exploration or confirmation, and virtual interactions with other players from around the world can be an exercise in trying out new ways of being or interacting with others.

The current research was designed to explore the interaction between online and offline identities in an MMO where the visual representation of the avatar is de-emphasized. In avatar-based interfaces, the player's agency within the game is clearly depicted as a function of the character model; without an avatar, the line between the player's and avatar's actions are more ambiguous, and the ambiguous question of where the player stops and the character begins comes to the foreground. Ten players of EVE Online were interviewed, each for approximately one hour, using a semi-structured interview protocol. Interviews included discussion about what is meaningful to them about their online experience, how they experience the boundaries between themselves and their online characters, and how they experience the moral ambiguity of the EVE environment.

Thematic analysis revealed a number of themes in players' conceptualization of their experience with EVE. Regarding the appeal of EVE Online, emergent themes were: The Importance of Social Interaction, My Choices Matter, Algeism, My Relationships in EVE Are Meaningful. In the interaction between self and character, emergent themes were: My Character

and I Are the Same, My Character and I Are Different, Parallels, Time Commitment Creates Friction, One Identity Learning From the Other, and Intersections. On confronting the moral ambiguity of EVE, emergent themes were: My Prosocial Choices, Someone Else's Antisocial Choices, and Moral Ambiguity.

A player's investment in an MMO is a complex, nuanced, and meaningful process of identity and relational exploration. Participants unilaterally emphasized the social importance of their gameplay—of the value of developing relationships and feeling connected to others through EVE. Even in instances where players asserted that their character was a separate and independent entity from the player, it became clear that the player was still enacting qualities, characteristics, and motivations that make up their offline identity. Players described understanding themselves in new ways—as more charismatic, as a leader, as having more resilience—as a result of their time in EVE. Players seemed to be using the virtual environment to explore fascinating questions: how do I find redemption in the face of extreme loss? How may I see myself as a good person after doing something hurtful?

Dissemination of these findings may contribute to the shift in scholarly dialogue about video gaming from addiction and violence-causation to meaning and identity exploration. On a clinical level, this may inspire counselors and therapists to approach their clients' gaming behavior with a sense of curiosity. In my own work as a psychotherapist, I have found clients' gaming habits to be fertile ground for insight into clients' values, beliefs, and self-concept.

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Appendix A  
Informed Consent

**Online Consent Form**

Antioch University, Seattle  
2326 6<sup>th</sup> Ave, Seattle, WA 98121

Project: Title of Dissertation

Researcher: Matthew Ponsford, Psy.D. Student in Clinical Psychology

The goal of this study is to understand the experience of EVE Online players, and the interaction between an individual's online character and their real-life identity.

1. I consent to participate in this research project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have read the plain language statement of the aims of the research project.
2. To preserve anonymity, I understand that all written work will use pseudonyms instead of my name or character name, unless written permission is obtained by the researcher or I desire to be identified in written work.
  - a. I understand that I am under no obligation to consent to my name or in-game character name being used in this study.
3. I consent to being audiotaped for the purposes of interview transcription and review.
4. I understand that any information I provide is confidential, and will be not be shared with any third party.
5. I acknowledge that:
  - a. The possible effects of participating in the interview have been explained to my satisfaction;
  - b. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time;
  - c. The project is for the purpose of scholastic research;
  - d. I understand that the confidentiality of my information will be protected at all times;
  - e. Data will be stored with the researcher for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
  - f. I may be provided with a copy of my data and research findings on request.

By responding to this email with the phrase "I Agree" in the subject line, I consent to informed participation in this research study.