The Presentation of Self in

Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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Abstract

This thesis examined the presentation of self in Massively Multiplayer Online games, to investigate how players create and maintain versions of self in these environments. Key research questions concerned the motivation for engaging in these behaviours, the impact of such activities on their offline lives and for those that did not engage in the active presentation of self, why they did not do this.

There were three studies in the thesis, employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The first study consisted of interviews (n=29), analysed using Grounded theory, and the second an online focus group (n=13 participants) explored using thematic analysis. These results were combined to create a theoretical model for the presentation of self in MMOs. Based on these concept statements a third study (n=408) was created, using an online questionnaire design. Results indicated that a five factor model was the most satisfactory means of explaining the presentation of self in MMOs – with Presentation of the Existing Self, Social Interaction, Gaming Aesthetics, Presenting Different Sides of the Self, and Emotional Impact as the salient factors.

Virtual environments are rapidly emerging as a core element of human socialising, as evidenced by the growth of the games industry and the expansion of social networking sites in the last ten years. MMOs represent just one type of virtual environment but also some of the most exciting, since they allow the presentation of multiple versions of self in a fantastical social environment.

The thesis adds to the literature through its examination of the presentation of self, in illustrating how and why playe3rs experience and represent their offline self in MMOs. This has not been achieved in any other previously published work and is an original contribution to the literature.

Thesis Introduction

This thesis looks at the presentation of self in Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) – an immersive game type where thousands of people can play at the same time. There are a number of different MMOs, although the most common sub-genre is the 'Swords'n' Sorcery' type where players can cast spells and engage in melee combat to fight mythical creatures. The most popular game of this sub-genre is World of Warcraft (WoW) (Blizzard, 2014) which currently has 7.4 million active subscribers; it is 10 years old at the time of writing and has been superseded by other games such as Guild Wars 2 (ArenaNet, 2014).

The term 'virtual spaces' is used to identify all areas where individuals can virtually exist, with the term covering blogs, websites, social networks and spaces such as MMOs or Second Life. The last two elements are known as 'virtual worlds' (Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, & Wadley, 2009), characterised by the manipulation of avatars in an immersive environment. The traditional acronym for these games is MMORPG's (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Play Games) though the acronym is flawed; its direct ancestor is the MUD (Multi-user dungeon) that had role-players as participants and, as such, it might be expected that the 'RP' of MMORPG represents the same. However, very little role-play occurs in MMORPGs today (Yee, 2006b) and the term is becoming increasingly obsolete. In recognition of this, and given the cumbersome nature of the original acronym (Barnett & Coulson, 2010), the term MMO is increasingly used (Williams, Kennedy, & Moore, 2011).

There are a number of phrases in the literature to differentiate between the physical world and the virtual one; for ease of comprehension, the words 'offline' will be used to refer to the physical world, and 'online' to the virtual one.

There are a number of common features of MMOs; first, the servers are permanently on, so the game state is continually changing and there is no 'save' as per traditional games. Second, the player exists in the game through an 'avatar', which is a 3D rendered model that exists in the game space. Third, the avatar is created through the 'character creation' process where typically the player will choose the avatar's race (e.g. Orc.), faction (e.g. evil), class (e.g. Necromancer.), a name, plus the physical appearance of their avatar. Fourth, players can typically either fight game generated monsters (Player vs. Environment – PvE), or against other players (Player vs. Player – PvP).

Finally, aside from general social interaction through a number of chat channels, there are two main social structures within MMOs – the first, Guilds, are membership only structures where players can associate more freely, with dedicated chat channels. The second, Raid groups, are also membership only, but unlike Guilds, only exist for the purpose of high-level gaming. In addition, players can commonly trade with other players, and engage in short-term group activities such as tracking down a fugitive.

To aid comprehension of what a MMO looks like, appendix I has two screen shots from a typical MMO - Guild Wars 2. Appendix 1.1 illustrates the game without the graphical user interface (GUI), with the author's avatar in the centre of the screen. Appendix 1.2 shows a different shot (and character), with the GUI showing – the standard set-up for a gaming screen. In appendix II a glossary of common gaming terms is provided, which may also prove useful.

MMOs are one of the most interesting virtual environments currently in existence, providing players with the opportunity to create exciting new versions of self, should they so wish. Furthermore, they are places where people can learn about themselves, and explore aspects of themselves, resulting in improvements in their offline lives. Given these benefits, and the large player base of MMOs, understanding how players engage in presenting new versions of self will enable the creation of even more varied virtual spaces, with the resulting benefits to their users.

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Chapter One: The Presentation of the Offline Self

1.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter aims to establish the theoretical context of the thesis, with three specific aims:

1. To define commonly used terminologies with respect to the Self, Identity, and Self-Concept.
2. To examine the literature to facilitate understanding of the self in Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs).
3. To establish a framework to understand the presentation of self in MMOs.

In examining the literature and theories relating to the self, a foundation is laid for chapter Two, which discusses online versions of self and for the thesis itself, by providing a platform on which the central arguments of the thesis are proposed.

1.2 Terminology

The literature has debated the meaning assigned to various terms relating to the self and so, to fix the meanings used in this thesis, a short discussion on this issue seems warranted. Drawing upon Mead (1934), the self can be an 'Experiencing Subject', with a distinction between the 'I' and the 'Me'. A second variation, proposed by Leary and Tangney (2003), distinguished between the self, and beliefs about oneself – as reflected in the self-concept. Finally, the self is an 'Executive Agent', where the self is the decision maker, involved in executive functioning and regulating actions. The 'decision maker' is reflected in the concept of the 'Phenomenal' self, defined as "a person's awareness, arising out of interactions with his environment, of his own beliefs, values, attitudes, the links between them, and their implications for his behavior" (Jones & Gerard, 1967, p.716). This is important as it references interaction with the environment, whilst acknowledging the impact of cognitive-affective elements – both of which will feature in the model underpinning the thesis. In contrast, Owens (2006)

argued that self is an umbrella term that has meaning in itself, but which also includes identity and self-concept. He defined self as being "*an organized and interactive system of thoughts, feelings, identities, and motives that (1) is born of self-reflexivity and language, (2) people attribute to themselves, and (3) characterize specific human beings*" (p.206, italics in original).

Furthermore, the process of 'presenting the self' has terminological confusion; Leary and Kowalski (1990) argued the terms 'self-presentation' and 'Impression management' have been used interchangeably in the literature. Nonetheless, impression management has been defined as being "the goal-directed activity of controlling information about some person, object, idea, or event to audiences" (Schlenker & Pontari, 2000, p.201). They contend this is different to self-presentation which relates to information specific to the self.

This thesis adopts the definition of self provided by Jones and Gerard (1967), with the other definitions being discarded due to their vagueness in tying together cognitive, affective, and social elements. The Jones and Gerrard (1967) concept of the Phenomenal self acknowledges the reflexive nature of the self concerning held beliefs, values and attitudes – and also addresses the impact of social interaction. Players in MMOs can inhabit two worlds at the same time – the real and the virtual – and it is the potential for players to reference their real world selves, with the accompanying thoughts and emotions that accompany that world, which makes the Jones and Gerard definition appropriate.

1.3 Historical Context

Theories of the self have been core to psychology since its inception, with early research arguing that it was a product of social life (James, 1890). Subsequently, Cooley (1902) introduced the concept of the 'Looking Glass self', arguing that individuals reflect upon how others view them and incorporate that view into their self-concept. It is a paradigm that can be seen in the work of theorists such as Goffman (1959), Schlenker (1980), and Leary (1996).

Central to this idea is the importance of 'significant others' – people who are psychologically closer to the individual, and more likely to influence their self-perceptions (Cooley, 1902). An extension of this idea – the 'generalised other' – was proposed by Mead (1934), where the other includes the entire social group.

Furthermore, Mead (1934) argued that the self is not a structure but is a process that is continually created through interaction. In this respect, he made a distinction between the 'I' which represents the individual self and the 'Me' which represents the social self. The 'I' is simultaneously an actor and observer – as the actor it initiates action in response to external stimuli and as the observer it monitors the 'Me' that is engaged in those actions (Holland & Lachicotte, 2007); through this mechanism the self is able to gain reflexivity (Elliott, 2008). This allows Mead to propose a dynamic between self and society, without charges of determinism being levelled against him (Edwards, 2007).

Mead's (1934) symbolic interactionism does have its critics, with Elliott (2008) arguing that the model is "too rationalistic, conscious and cognitive" (p.35). He argued there was little reference to emotionality in Mead's (1934) work and, given the emphasis on reflexivity, affective elements should be included in that reflection. Elliott (2008) also argued that the Meadian connection between self and society is too restrictive, with little space afforded for individual expression. Finally, Elliott (2008) argued that Mead does not fully explain the interaction between the 'I', and the 'Me', nor how the 'I' develops over time. Despite these criticisms however, the work of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) has been instrumental in establishing the self – as a reflexive entity born of social interaction.

1.4 Self as Structure (SaS)

In the following sections, a model of the self is introduced which argues that the self can be seen both as a structure, and as a process. Indeed, both of these elements must occur for the self to exist in a social context. In section 1.4, the self is considered as being a mental Structure – capable of being created and maintained (Barclay, 1986; Conway, 2005), with reference to looking at schema theory (Markus, 1977), and alternate versions of self (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ogilvie, 1987).

In section 1.5, the self is considered as a Process, producing the self for consumption by the generalised other (Mead, 1934). A psycho-sociological approach is presented (Goffman, 1959), followed by an assessment of psychological research (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

1.4.1 Schema Theory

MMOs enable players to present aspects of their offline self in the online world, however this is not random but guided by both the existing mental structures and goals of the interaction. One way of conceptualising of the structures is as Schemata, defined as "hierarchically organised sets of units describing generalised knowledge about an event or scene sequence" (Mandler, 2014, p.14). Originally applied to memory by Bartlett (1932), several types have been proposed such as role schema, content free schema, and scripts (Abelson, 1981); all schemas having the common characteristic of having various attributes, with a hierarchical structure. Schema theory has not been universally accepted though, with a number of criticisms being levelled at it. A primary criticism is that there is no coherent theory which ties together schema work (Lodge, McGraw, Conover, Feldman, & Miller, 1991); instead there is a loose series of applications of schemata, a situation compounded by insufficient structure to test the falsifiability of the model (Mandler, 2014) and competing terminologies (Richardson & Ball, 2009) . However, Plant and Stanton (2013) argued that current schema theory meets Kerlinger and Lee's (2000) criteria that a model must be capable of predicting and explaining psychological events.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, of interest here are self-schemata, as proposed by Markus (1977). Self-schemata are a means of understanding the organisation of self-knowledge, with self-schemas organising knowledge of the self and facilitates the acquisition, processing, and recall of knowledge about the self. Generally self-schemata are more complex than other schemata, since knowledge of the self as an integrated whole must be represented within the schema, together with a framework of thoughts and emotions about social contacts. It should be noted of course, that in presenting a version of self, the individual does not only refer to self-schema. Indirectly, other schema are accessed as the schema network becomes activated – in this way, a MMO player creating an evil warlock may access parts of their self-schema concerning what is means to be evil, but will also access schema for who a warlock is.

A key feature of self-schemata is whether an individual is schematic or aschematic on a certain trait, with the former being associated with dimensions that are important to the person, and the opposite for the latter (Markus, 1977). This, combined with the filtering of schema-congruent information, is what Barclay (1986) defined as 'Schematization' – the process by which schemata are acquired. By engaging with an

activity on a regular basis, common features are identified which then become normalized within the appropriate schema.

There is evidence to suggest that self-schema relevant information relevant will be processed in more depth than non-schematic information (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987). However, schema-incongruent information is remembered best of all, since such events get additional attention when being encoded (Hastie, 1981). Later, this is raised as a possible reason why certain points in game playing are particularly memorable (i.e. character creation) – they represent *new* ways of thinking about the self.

An extension of the schematic paradigm, the model of Evaluative self-Organisation (Showers, 1992), argued that there is a distribution of positive and negative beliefs across aspects of the self, together with an ascribed level of importance to each belief (Pelham & Swann, 1989). The model proposed that typically those beliefs will either be integrated with each other (the Integrated perspective), or separate (Compartmentalised); in the former situation, the self-concept contains both positive *and* negative beliefs, whereas in the latter the self-concept is characterised by either positive *or* negative beliefs.

This combination of factors means that those that see their positive self-aspects to be more important are likely to have higher mood and self-esteem when those aspects are compartmentalised, in contrast to those with an integrated perspective (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007). This is because the individual is able to access purely positive emotions, with negative feelings being rarely activated and so largely inaccessible. Conversely, if compartmentalised individuals define their negative elements as being important, they are more likely to experience low self-esteem and mood. Those who have an integrated structure are more likely to maintain a constant mood because they are able to access both positive and negative beliefs about the self. This combination of the positive or negative valences of an aspect of the self, together with their perceived importance creates an 'index of relative importance' (Thomas, Ditzfeld, & Showers, 2013), with evidence to suggest that people can change their most accessed strategy over a long period of time if it isn't developmentally viable, or in the shorter term in specific or extreme conditions. The qualitative studies will illustrate that MMOs can provide a space where this change can occur.

However, the idea of the self existing as multiple elements is not new (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Mead, 1934). Goffman (1959) described the individual as being a blur

when seen close up, indicating multiple aspects, and Markus and Wurf (1987) proposed the idea of having possible selves that are aspired to. This line of thinking draws from the self-schemeta work of Markus (1977), who argued that different selves are represented by different schemata. Typically the basis for these distinct versions of the self were based on context, traits, and roles (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007) with differential importance given to each version (Pelham & Swann, 1989).

Nonetheless, and even acknowledging the enhanced processing power that would accompany specific schemata, Markus and Nurius (1986) argued that it is not possible for all self-knowledge to be processed at the same time. Instead, the existence of a subset of self-schemata which are active, regulating cognition and behaviour has been proposed – the 'Working self-concept' (Markus & Wurf, 1987). Furthermore, the working self-concept is continually being reconstructed, and any perceived 'stability' in the model is a reflection of the same organisational elements being activated, so resulting in the same schemas being accessed. However, even with an active working self, the intention to present a particular version of self can be passive or active (Baumeister, 1982). Although normally automatic (passive) – a state which saves cognitive resources – the person can take active control when required to present a particular version of self (Paulhus, 1993), or when there is a risk of the presentation being rejected (Goffman, 1959). This is a cogent argument, given that being continually attentive as a consequence of need or situation cues would draw heavily upon the individual's cognitive resources. By allowing for a passive state, with active control being taken when required, such concerns are avoided.

Given its status as a subset of schemata, the working self-concept has a critical role to play in enabling the self to be both a structure, and a process. In effect, it is the mechanism by which the self (in its structural form), together with motivations to achieve a certain presentation of self, is transformed into a process – a dynamic presentation of the self, responsive to the social environment. The working self-concept is critical in understanding both *how* the self-concept is transformed and maintained, and the *impact* of social interaction on the self.

Autobiographical Memory and the Self-Memory System

This section introduces the concepts of autobiographical memory, and the Self Memory system, as being one way of envisioning the storing and accessing of information about the self. It provides bedrock for the thesis model in creating a framework for the self to be seen as a structure.

The way that knowledge about the self is organised is also relevant since the presentation of self in virtual worlds, as in the real world, is influenced by prior knowledge. One concept of value is that of autobiographical memory, or put more simply memories of episodes from an individual's life (Williams, Conway, & Cohen, 2007). Pillemer's (1992) formulation of autobiographical memory presents the construct as having three functions – a Directive one (planning behaviour), a self one (providing a sense of self continuity), and a Communicative one (facilitating social interaction). The Directive function allows the individual to plan present and future behaviour, to facilitate problem solving (Cohen, 1998), and enables people to update their understanding of previous events, and thereby predict the future more accurately (Lockhart, 1989).

The self function allows individuals to achieve a sense of continuity (Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005), with the autobiographical memory allowing a sense of coherence over successive time periods (Barclay, 1994), with its importance being identified in both child (Fivush, 1998) and adolescent (Habermas & Bluck, 2000) development. Lastly, the Communicative function of autobiographical memory enables social interaction by providing material to converse with (Cohen, 1998; Pillemer, 1998). It also enables empathic responses, particularly if the listener has a personal experience with which they can respond (Pillemer, 1998).

Using an exploratory factor analysis on a self-report dataset of 161 undergraduate students, the model has been partially supported by Bluck et al. (2005). It is surprising that a confirmatory factor analysis was not conducted on the data, given the wealth of material on autobiographical memory, but Bluck et al. (2005) argued, a little unconvincingly, that there was an insufficiently clear theoretical model to complete a CFA. Nonetheless, their results showed that some changes would be beneficial in comparison to the original model – namely that the directive function was broader than anticipated, the self function was narrower and limited to self-continuity, and that the

communicative function should be split between the 'Development' and 'Nurturing' of relationships. Whilst the research was valuable in starting empirical research on autobiographical memory, the self-report nature of the data needs to be addressed in future research, to establish both its accuracy, and whether the participants were able to reflect (and feedback) on all aspects of the autobiographical memory.

A more recent model of the autobiographical memory was presented by Conway (2005), with two main levels – one level is the Conceptual self which contained Lifetime Periods and General Events, and the other level is Episodic Memories (previously referred to as Event-Specific Knowledge (ESK) in a previous model – Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Lifetime periods were argued to contain thematic knowledge around a common theme, and associated knowledge on the period being described (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). Commonly lifetime periods also contain knowledge about goals and activities that were common to that period (Conway, 2005), so enabling easier differentiation between lifetime periods. The second element of the Conceptual self is that of General Events which contains more specific knowledge, including knowledge of repeated events (Barsalou, 1988) and extended events (Haque & Conway, 2001).

The second main level is that of Episodic Memories, which refers to specific knowledge relevant to a particular general event. This corresponds closely with Tulving's (1983) conceptualisation of episodic memories, where affective, cognitive, and sensory elements of an experience are all encoded. The importance of imagery is emphasised by Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000), particularly with reference to episodic memories – when employed in creating self-images this facet enables for better filtering of self-knowledge, since the self-images can be used to create different selves. Imagery is relevant both to the idea of having multiple concepts of self, but also in explaining the graphical interface of MMOs as being particularly potent in representing a version of self.

The construction of knowledge within the autobiographical memory is hierarchical in nature (Pillemer, 1998), with episodic memories being situated within a general memory, which itself in placed within a lifetime period; however, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) argued that these recollections are not necessarily 'memories' however, or indeed conscious, but instead are "transitory dynamic mental constructions generated from an underlying knowledge base" (p.261). In effect, autobiographical

memories are not actual recollections, but reconstructions of previous events (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987; Conway, 2005), where the reconstructions are driven by self-schemata – they are intrinsically related to the self (Conway & Tacchi, 1996), with research indicating that such memories are both distinct in their unique relation to the self (Brewer, 1986) and being able to act as a stable system which can be used to generate, change, and sustain aspects of self-knowledge (Conway & Rubin, 1993)

Drawing on research looking at the Working self, Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000) introduced the Self Memory System, which combined the Working self with an Autobiographical Knowledge Base. It is a system which allows for the enactment of current goals, tempered by the recollection of autobiographical memories. The working self has the role of selecting the memory to be accessed (based on the goal in hand) and of constructing the memory. One of the functions of autobiographical knowledge is to 'ground' the self, by ensuring that current goals are realistic and not too far removed from what has occurred (Conway & Tacchi, 1996). Within the model, there is the assumption that memories retrieved must be consistent with one's current goals and self-image, and that if there is too much discrepancy between the two, then long-term memories will be examined, at the expense of specific memories (Schoofs, Hermans, & Raes, 2012). As will be discussed later, one of the advantages of MMOs is that they are not realistic, and so can circumvent the requirement that a memory is grounded in reality.

In recognition of socio-cognitive research into the self, Conway, Meares, and Standart (2004) acknowledged the existence of working self-concepts, such as Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). These were seen as being conceptual knowledge structures which exist independent of memory but which can access memories if required – thereby being able to define the self, the environment, and other people. However, the Conway et al. (2004) alterations are a little too superficial in terms of their integration of social element of interaction. It does not address the presentation of self nor the transfer of knowledge from one person to another (i.e. the symbolic interaction).

1.4.2 Versions of Self

Having looked at the structural elements that may be involved in the production of a version of self, this section looks at the different versions of self that can be presented. Each version of self may (in differing degrees) have its own constellation of thoughts, feelings, motivations, and related associations attached to it, and research has been given over to identifying specific versions of self. Rogers (1951) proposed that there is the 'Real' self, which represented that side of the self which could potentially become self-actualised and, as such, is a future version of self. However, with internal and external influences altering this optimal possibility, an 'ideal' version of self is developed instead. This has similarities to the work of Higgins (1987) who argued that there are three versions of self at any one time, and the work of Markus and Nurius (1986) who proposed the idea of 'Possible' selves. Similarly, there is the notion of the 'True' self (Winnicott, 1965) – a version of self centred on the notion of a healthy self as simply 'being'. It should be noted that Winnicott also posited the existence of the false self that, in its most severe form could transcend the true self, but normally served useful functions for the individual such as facilitating social interaction.

Self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) sought to explain how people experience different emotions based upon the consonance or dissonance of those states. The model proposed that there are three versions of self – the 'Actual', the 'Ideal' and the 'Ought', which act as templates for future versions of self. The Actual self referred to the self as it actually is, whilst the Ideal represented the self that the person would like to be. Finally, the Ought referred to a structure which refers to how the person should be, as mandated by parents, friends, schooling, and society. Extensively used since its inception in a variety of spheres including body image (Vartanian, 2012), online gaming (Przybylski, Weinstein, Murayama, Lynch, & Ryan, 2012), social networking sites (Marder, Joinson, & Shankar, 2012), in self-presentation (Kim, Chan, & Kankanhalli, 2012), self-discrepancy theory has also been linked to autobiographical memory. For example, using a cue word discrepancy task, Schoofs et al. (2012) were able to show that depressed adolescents retrieved fewer specific autobiographical memories when provided with a high discrepancy cue between the actual – ideal selves.

There are some concerns with self-discrepancy theory however; first, several studies have indicated that the discriminant validity of the Ideal and Ought concepts is poor, with correlations over .50 having been found (Ozgul, Heubeck, Ward, &

Wilkinson, 2003; Tangney, Niedenthal, Covert, & Barlow, 1998). Second, predicted emotional states as a product of self dissonance have only been partially supported, with reactions to ideal and ought discrepancies failing to be discernibly different (Bruch, Rivet, & Laurenti, 2000; Heppen & Ogilvie, 2003). Finally, the self-Discrepancy model does not propose an origin to the types of self, with Zentner and Renaud (2007) remarking that the transmission of values could be described as a process of internalization where the parental and societal standards are gradually incorporated into the child's concept of self – a process similar to that described by Vygotsky (1962). Interestingly, Zenter and Renaud (2007) found that the transfer of parental ideas of the ideal self to the child were most likely to occur if the parent was supportive, loving, and, ironically, encouraged the child to discover their own ideals. Similarly, the impact of others was found in the so called 'Michelangelo Phenomenon', where partners in a relationship will move closer to their own ideal selves, as a product of affirmation of that ideal self by other person (Rusbult, Kumashiro, Kubacka, & Finkel, 2009). In the next chapter, the relationship between the game player and their character is considered with this in mind.

Research also indicated that there are versions of the self which people will seek to avoid, with Sullivan (1953) arguing there is the 'Not' me. This last element represented a version of self which embodied those elements which the individual did not want to lay claim to and therefore would not move towards. This idea was taken up by others, including Carver, Lawrence and Scheier (1999) and Ogilvie (1987), with the latter arguing that part of Higgins' (1987) theory was erroneous in its assumption that the motivational opposite of the Ideal self is the Real self. Ogilvie (1987) reasoned that the distance from the Real self to the Undesired self is more important than the Real to the Ideal, with his results showing that satisfaction with the current self was correlated more with the subjective distance from unwanted effects than towards desired states. He argued that the opposite of the Ideal is not the Real me, it is the Not-ideal or even worse the Not-me. This conclusion was supported by research that found if an individual feels they are approaching their feared self, then anxiety and guilt occurs (Carver et al., 1999). Ogilvie's (1987) research was partially flawed though, since the data set was drawn exclusively from college students and given the transitive period of those years in terms of the self, it might be argued that their version of the ideal self and not-Ideal might be in flux at this point. However, his work has influenced Leary and Kowalski (1990), with their reference to desired and undesired versions of the self.

Another theory which proposed different versions of self was that of Possible Selves that, drawing from Markus's concept of self-schemas, attempted to tie together cognitive and emotional aspects of the self (Markus, 1977). The central concept was that there exist 'Possible Selves' which represent the individual's idea of a future self, what they would wish to be, and what they feared turning into. Markus and Nurius (1986) also argued that they indicate the social constraints that exist for an individual, with possible selves emerging from past social experiences. Implicit within the idea of possible selves is the importance of future possible selves (Dunkel, 2000). However, possible selves can also refer both to past selves and that to unwanted possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) – a concept closer to Ogilvie's (1987) undesired selves. Again, this idea is reflected of the later work by Leary and Kowalski (1990) and their proposal of desired and undesired selves.

There has been extensive research supporting the idea of possible selves, with the construct being shown to be instructive in helping both school children (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004), and in delinquent youths (Oyserman & Terry, 2002) to create new versions of self. It has also been used in such diverse areas as explaining the impact of positive activity interventions in creating 'better' versions of self (Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2013), in explaining teacher expectations for the future (Hamman, Wang, & Burley, 2013), and online dating website behaviour (Casimiro, 2014). Furthermore, research by Dunkel and Anthis (2000) supported the hypothesis that possible selves are a means of exploring the self, with results showing that the extent of identity exploration is a significant predictor of changes in the number of possible selves generated. It would appear however that the age of the individual is relevant; research indicated that older adults have fewer hoped for or feared possible selves, whilst younger adults generate possible selves with greater amount of variation (Cross & Markus, 1991). Of course, this research was conducted using a real world frame of reference whereas MMOs are entirely fantastic, and therefore potentially not constrained by perceptions of realism, or through reference to the offline world.

The impact of possible selves as an instrument for behaviour change was also examined by Abrams and Aguilar (2005), who looked at behaviour change amongst young offenders. They referred to Stein and Markus's (1996) Behaviour Change model which argued that there are three stages in behavioural change – the recognition that negative behavioural patterns have led to the current situation, the desire to change those patterns and the imagining of new possible selves, and finally the implementation

of concrete strategies to achieve those possible selves. Supporting use of this model, Abrams and Aguilar (2005) found that offenders who were able to identify those elements in their behaviour which had led to their current situation were more likely to change. They also found that offenders created both hoped for and feared selves, both of which were predicted in Markus and Nurius's work (1986). When considered in conjunction with the Self Memory system, this model provides some clue as to how possible selves might integrate with it. Through existing autobiographical memories which provide a template for creating a new version of self, a reimagining of the self can occur through the working self-concept, which then implements the required actions to achieve it. In this way, the template and motivational elements of possible selves can be integrated into the structural elements of the self.

The Possible selves work of Markus and Nurius (1986) was important, rightly highlighting the chronological aspects of the self-concept, something also present in the Self Memory System (Conway, 2005). However, it is not without its faults, since it contains little reference to social aspects of self. Although drawing from Markus's (1977) self-schema theory which included reference to social connections, the Markus and Nurius (1986) work leaves this area largely undeveloped. In addition, it makes little reference to the processes influencing the creation, maintenance, and discarding of possible selves, or how conflicting identities are managed.

Nonetheless, possible selves have also been suggested by Dunkel and Anthis (2000) as being able to explain the mechanism behind the Identity Status Model (Marcia, 1966; Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993), which itself was an extension of work by Erikson (1968). Erikson argued that identity formation is characterised by a series of 'identifications', particularly during adolescence where a new post-childhood identity emerges. The process is characterised by *Identity Synthesis*, where the individual reworks past and present identifications into a viable set of ideals, and by *Identity Confusion*, typified by an inability to create a coherent sense of self.

The Identity Status model (Marcia, 1966, 2001) extended the Erikson (1968) work by outlining four different styles of exploration and commitment that occur during this process. 'Identity achievers' have explored their options and committed to a choice, whereas 'Identity Moratoriums' are still actively exploring their options. 'Identity Foreclosures' are seen as having committed themselves to an identity, but without a period of exploration, and finally 'Identity Diffusions' are not actively examining their

identity and also haven't committed to one. Later research by Waterman (1982) argued Moratoriums are better seen as a transitory state, with the most common sequence being Foreclosures – Moratoriums – Achievers (Kroger & Haslett, 1988), with progressive changes towards the Achiever status as being more than twice as likely as regressive ones (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010). Whilst the Identity Status model (Marcia, 1966, 2001) has been applied (sparingly) to online environments, such as looking at adolescent identity on Myspace (Rosen, 2007), there is space for more research into its application in virtual spaces.

The Identity Status model has been criticised though, as outlined by Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx and Zamboanga (2012). First, the idea of progression towards an 'Achieved' state seems to imply that identity becomes fixed during late adolescence / early adulthood (van Hoof, 1999), contrary to the ideas behind self-schema theory (Markus, 1977) and the symbolic interactionists (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Second, although Marcia's (2001) Achievement and Diffusion are similar to Erikson's (1968) concepts of Synthesis and Confusion (respectively), evidence suggests that there is little theoretical overlap regarding Foreclosure and Moratorium. Third, initial research into the model tended to examine the relationship between external variables and the model statuses (Marcia, 1980), with the subsequent emphasis on classifying individuals. Schwartz et al. (2012) argued that this denied the dynamic tension inherent in Erikson's (1968) model. Recent research has sought to address some of these issues, with Luyckx, Goossens, Soenens, and Beyers (2006) sub-dividing Marcia's (1966) exploration and commitment phases into two sub-processes each – exploration into breadth and depth, and commitment into commitment making, and identification.

Research looking at different versions of self (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986), together with theoretical models for stages of identity transition (Luyckx et al., 2006; Meeus, Van De Schoot, Keijsers, Schwartz, & Branje, 2010) has proven valuable in fleshing out the structural nature of the Self Memory System (Conway, 2005). Whilst the Self Memory System provides a coherent account of the integration between memory and the self-concept it is intrinsically 'empty', since there is no guiding force to identify priorities in the presentation of self. Together with the identity transition models which outline the stages, the versions of self literature can provide substance for the Self Memory system and, in being applied to MMOs, can identify the significant elements of the presentation of self through game characters.

1.5 Self as Process (SaP)

Whilst the previous section has considered some of the structural characteristics of the self, this thesis also examines the process of presenting the self to the 'Generalised other' (Mead, 1934). Section 1.5.1 presents early psycho-sociological work by Goffman (1959) who outlined a coherent framework for the presentation of self, which has influenced many theorists. Section 1.5.2 looks at subsequent psychological work, which sought to develop detailed accounts of how individuals attempt to influence other people, in the advancement of their goals.

1.5.1 Psycho-Sociological Research

After the work of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934), the work of Goffman (1959, 1974) represents some of the earliest work to address the act of presentation of a version of self to the Generalised Other. His theory of the presentation of self has been applied to real world contexts such as self-esteem (Sowislo & Orth, 2013) and stigma (Jahoda, Wilson, Stalker, & Cairney, 2010), as well as virtual spaces such as academic homepages (Hyland, 2011), Twitter (Marwick, 2011), and virtual environments such as Second Life (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

The symbolic interactionist account of interaction, as typified by Mead (1934) and Goffman (1952), argued that the individual defines himself as someone who possesses certain qualities and that attempts to convince others to accept this performance as being 'true'. This is not automatically accepted though, and as such the person is in a constant flux of renegotiating the version of self that will be accepted. Central to Goffman's (1959) account of the self is his concept of 'Regions' – the Front region is where a performance is given, whilst the Back region is a place where this performance is wilfully discarded. However, what to one audience is the Front region might be the Back region to another – an example being a tutor's office, where it acts as the front region when the tutor is talking to a student, but the back region when chatting with colleagues (Goffman, 1959). So, it is both the audience and actor that dictate the status of a region. This is important because, given the thesis argument for the presentation of self in MMOs, the consideration of which region is 'Front' or 'Back' is pertinent. The nature of virtual spaces means that traditional understandings of *who*

the audience are and *where* they are located are subverted, since the player can be in the front region by putting on a performance to one audience, but be in the back region with respect to another.

Also relevant to the study of MMOs is the importance of being able to play out roles with a multiplicity of classes, races, and faction to join – each of which can have certain elements associated with them. For Goffman (1961), a role prescribed a certain way to act – if the individual fitted into the role and acted within the boundaries associated with it, then they could claim all attributes associated with it. An individual can be involved in many interactive systems at the same time, and as such have more than one role, such that the individual has the ability to convey manifold performances as a "simultaneous multiplicity of selves" (Goffman, 1961, p.117). MMOs provide an environment where this simultaneous multiplicity can exist, free of offline restrictions, but guided by various role elements that can trigger the presentation of self.

Goffman's dramaturgical perspective was complimented by insights into the structural nature of social interaction, and his book *Frame Analysis* (1974) looked at how players understand what is occurring in a situation, and what is an appropriate action to take. This refers back to Goffman's (1959) argument that what is deemed as 'reality' is a subjective, and negotiated, term. Indeed, a twitch and a blink have the same outward physical manifestation, but very different social connotations (Manning, 1992), but it is the assumptions that people make about a situation that allows decryption what is going on. The concept of the frame provides one of the main strengths of Goffman's (1974) work, but it is ambiguous as to who decides where these boundaries lie. The combination of actors and audience blurs the responsibility of who is responsible for designating the boundary as having started. In *Frame Analysis* Goffman also writes about 'Resource Continuity' – the extent to which some element of continuation occurs between events, mirroring an earlier theme in *Presentation of Self* (1959). He wrote:

> "each artefact and person involve in a framed activity has a continuing biography, that is, a traceable life (or remains of one) before and after the event, and each biography ensures a continuity of absolute distinguishableness, that is, selfsameness" (Goffman, 1974, p.287)

On the surface, this is contrary to his position in *Presentation of Self* (1959) that there is no individual self within interactions, beyond a biological substrate with a

motivation to engage in social interaction. One means of resolving this issue is to consider that the concept of self is still seen as being constructed through the medium of the interaction – a shared understanding of the self that is being presented. This unique expressive function, as espoused in *Frame Analysis* (1974), is not necessarily a personality or a unique identity, but a recollection of an interactive style. Whilst there is a trace of expressive uniqueness from one performance to the next, for Goffman this does not translate into a unique self. However, this does not fully resolve the dilemma – it is not clear whether the 'continuing biography' between interactions exists in the minds of the actor or the audience. If it is the actor, then there is a unique self; if the audience, then Goffman (1959) is arguing that there is no unique self. This is problematic when considering *On cooling out the Mark* (1952), where Goffman argued that the individual is sometimes forced to renegotiate a different version of self. However, this is problematic and raises the issue that if there is no permanent version of self, then what is being 'cooled out', i.e. what changes for the next cycle of interaction?

Also challenging is the question of who does the recollecting when actor and audience meet again – the actor or the audience? Is recollection negotiated by psychological elements within the participants, or in the interaction? The criticisms are not easily answered by Goffman (1959; 1974); indeed, whilst Goffman had many useful ideas, the concepts were disorganised and without sufficient scientific background to make predictions (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). An additional criticism is that personal reflexivity is not considered, though this may be due to his assertion that there is no 'entity' to engage in reflexivity, but it does not sit well with later research (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). Criticism has also centred on Goffman's (1959; 1974) omission of elements relating to power (G. Smith, 1988). As Dawe (1973, p.248) said "power is reduced to one-upmanship…purpose to self-presentation." In response, Williams (1986) argued that Goffman does talk about power, but with reference to potential resources that can be activated as influence. Giddens (2009) proposed that Goffman was concerned with interpersonal interaction and so power is out of his remit, but for Giddens this is an unsatisfactory argument. Giddens argued that even in situations of pure co-presence both parties are (unknowingly) drawing upon referenced institutions, so power is not merely the back-drop to the interaction – it is an integral part of it.

Goffman's (1959, 1974) work, although not without flaws, created a powerful framework for understanding the presentation of self. His work was able to tie together

the individual and the environment, and addressed how an individual presents a version of self in a more complete manner than previously achieved. This coherence is reflected in the thesis of the self as both Structure, and Process, although it is acknowledged that Goffman's work addresses the latter of these more fully. Goffman's work can be profitably applied to MMOs, principally due to the ease with which his work on regions and frame analysis can be applied to virtual environments.

1.5.2 Presenting the self

Research has shown that the Presentation of self reflects the desire by individuals to create a version of self which will be accepted by the target audience (Guadagno & Cialdini, 2007; Jones & Pittman, 1982); and this is supported by evidence to indicate that self-presentation is important as a means of regulating social rewards, maintaining or enhancing self-esteem, and constructing and maintaining the self-concept (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000). As such, there are tangible reasons why people engage in presenting a version of self.

So, dependent on the goal in hand and the context of the situation, there are a multitude of different techniques that can be used, (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984) as illustrated in Table 1.1. In addition, research indicates that when the target audience can influence the realisation of a desired goal, or when that goal is important, people will become more concerned with their performance (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Research indicated that the two most common self-presentation techniques were Ingratiation and Self-Promotion, the latter of which Jones and Pittman (1982) argued is done almost continuously, often with the tactic of denigrating one area of the self-presentation whilst promoting another. This is required since effective self-presentation is a balancing act between plausibility and self-enhancement (Schlenker & Leary, 1982), with the presented self tending to be similar to the internal self, if slightly more positive (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). However, there are risks associated with all impression management techniques, and in the act of self-promoting, the individual must not be seen be not overly self-praising – this can be seen as implausible (Schlenker, 1980), arrogant (Schlenker & Leary, 1982), or counter-productive if proven wrong (Tice & Wallace, 2003).

Table 1.1: Self-presentation techniques

Action	Definition	References
Apologies[1]	Admission of responsibility and expressing remorse	Tedeschi & Lindskild (1976)
Basking	Seeking enhancement through association with a successful other	Cialdini & Richardson (1980)
Blasting	Enhancing one's position by derogating another	Cialdini & Richardson (1980)
Disclaimers[1]	Providing an explanation before a negative consequence occurs	Hewitt & Stokes (1975)
Enhancements[2]	Taking verbal responsibility for a positive outcomes of an event	Tedeschi & Melburg (1984)
Excuses[1]	Denying responsibility for a situation	Tedeschi & Melburg (1984)
Exemplification[2]	Desire to be respected	Jones & Pittman (1982)
Ingratiation[2]	Desire to appear likeable	Jones & Pittman (1982)
Intimidation[2]	Desire to be feared	Jones & Pittman (1982)
Justification[1]	Accepting responsibility for an action, but denying the negative implications of that action	Tedeschi & Melburg (1984)
Sandbagging	Creating low expectations of a future performance	Gibson & Sachau (2000)
Self-handicapping	Creating obstacles for a task, so making it harder to achieve	Berglas & Jones (1978)
Self-promotion[2]	Desire to be seen as competent	Jones & Pittman (1982)
Supplication[2]	Desire to be seen as deserving sympathy	Jones & Pittman (1982)

Note: (1) – Tactical / Defensive & (2) – Tactical / Assertive Strategies (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984)

Moreover, the interplay of psychological and environmental elements has been proven to have an impact (Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Stein & Markus, 1996); in an experimental study looking at the self-promotion techniques amongst students, Giacalone and Rosenfeld (1986) found discrepancies in self-promoting behaviours

depending on the situation – with public presentations of self with a powerful authority figure producing the highest degree of self-promotion. In MMOs, the nature of the virtual space, combined with the high level of social interaction, means that there is ample opportunities for self-presentation. In general interaction, ingratiation and self-promotion would be expected, whereas in PvP one might expect more intimidation other players. In a raiding scenario where 25 players might be fighting at the same monster, a range of strategies might be visible, including blasting, exemplification, and supplication (together with the aforementioned techniques).

Workplace interaction has been extensively researched with respect to the application of self-presentation strategies, with experimental designs being the methodology of choice. Broadly, evidence suggests that the use of ingratiation and self-promoting tactics can be successful, with Wayne and Ferris (1990) reporting that employees who focused their presentation of self on the supervisor were more likely to have positive performance ratings. This research examined both real life and laboratory interaction – though it is questionable whether a valid 'working' relationship could be established in thirty minutes, as used in the latter condition. This result was replicated by Wayne & Kacmar (1991) who found that undergraduates who used ingratiation as part of their impression management received higher ratings than those that did not. However, as with the earlier research whilst the research used an empirical methodology and looked at face-to-face interaction, the interaction was not based on real life scenarios, and so it is debatable whether the conclusions drawn have ecological validity. In addition, the lack of any historical data makes the results somewhat sterile since no baseline was established.

Research has also looked at self-presentation and career progress, with evidence showing that company managers are able to get board promotions through targeted ingratiation of CEOs (Westphal & Stern, 2006), but that when used by women or ethnic minorities such strategies were less successful (Westphal & Stern, 2007). These pieces of research also benefitted from using psychometric designs, with over 5,000 participants drawn from a variety of companies, so allowing for more confidence in the results.

Based in part on the work by Jones and Pittman (1982), a later model classified self-presentation behaviours as being in one of four categories – Tactical / Assertive, Tactical / Defensive, Strategic / Assertive, Strategic / Defensive (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). In terms of these categorisations, Tactical measures were those seen to be

achieving short-term objectives looking at specific situations, whereas strategic measures applied to the construction of long-term versions of self. Assertive tactics involved the proactive presentation of self, whilst the model argued that Defensive tactics were employed when a self-presentation had gone awry and social restitution was required.

A Strategic / defensive strategy might include being assuming the role of a sick individual, and so being unable to engage in daily activities. However, some of the tactics were speculative in nature; indeed the Strategic / Defensive element of their model was the least well developed with many of the tactics appearing to link mental illness or addictions to defensive postures. Strategic / assertive strategies focused on the long term gain of reputation, with Tedeschi and Melburg (1984), drawing on the work of Hovland (1959) and the Yale Attitude Change model, arguing that five characteristics as being important – Attractiveness, Prestige, Esteem, Status and Credibility. In essence, the more attractive, prestigious, esteemed, higher status and higher credibility the actor was, the more likely that that version of self would be effective in influencing other people. These elements can be seen in MMOs, with the aesthetics of characters providing information about the status of the character, including where they have been and what they have done.

As with Jones and Pittman (1982), the work by Tedeschi and Melburg (1984) offered a micro-level analysis of self-presentation strategies. However, both theories are less models of self-presentation and more models of self-presentation techniques – there is no structure by which to understand how the self is created, maintained and presented. In addition, whilst the motivation to create an impression is acknowledged in the individual, the role of the audience or other is ignored in these formulations, leading to a one-sided appreciation of the presentation of self. As such, this work does not address the structure of the self and only partially the idea of the self as a process.

As will be seen in Chapter Two, there has been relatively little application of self-presentation strategies in virtual spaces. Research has tended to examine the applicability of self-concept theories in such spaces, such as those by Higgins (1987), and Markus and Nurius (1986). As has been discussed however, these theories can add detail to the self as structure, but do not provide any details of the self as being a process and indeed, are primarily theories of motivation. The current work addresses

the lack of detail in terms of process, and shows that players use strategies such as ingratiation, self-promotion, and intimidation may be present when playing a MMO.

1.6 Motivation for managing the self

Having discussed *how* individuals present a version of self, with reference to both the self as being a structure and a process, it is apt to consider *why* people present a version of self. Without reference to the objective behind a particular presentation of self, there can be no means of assessing whether the performance has been successful. As such, when considering the self as a Structure, and with reference to the Self Memory System (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), self-presentation aims are drawn from a combination of autobiographical memories, and the immediate goals based on the context in hand. When thinking of the self as a process, there is reference to the working self-concept and its goals, but with acknowledgement of the role played through social interaction.

Symbolic interactionism argues that people engage in self-presentation strategies as a means of influencing the impression that others have of them (Mead, 1934). Goffman (1959) did not really specify a motivation for socialisation, though implicit in his work is the person's desire to control other individual's reaction to the presentation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In addition, much of Goffman's work (1959) is centred on the intention to avoid embarrassment (Schudson, 1984), with people having expectations of how a social interaction should proceed, with preventative practices to protect both themselves and other actors in the situation. However, Goffman's (1959) focus on embarrassment does not hold across all social situations and his work does not address the motivation for self-presentation as much as the methods by which it occurs.

Research has focused more on the personal, as opposed to social, reasons for presenting a particular version of self, with Baumeister (1982) arguing that self-presentation is motivated by two factors – the desire to please the audience and gain rewards, and the need to construct a public version of self that is congruent with the ideal self. Similar arguments concerning pleasing the audience were made by Swann, Pelham, and Krull (1989) who argued that individuals try to engage in two processes at the same time – one of self-enhancement (promoting one's best side to the target individual), and one of self-verification (of being reassured that what one believes about the self is correct in the eyes of the target individual). In their research, student

participants were given a false personality test, and allowed to choose whether to hear feedback on their most positive or most negative attributes. Results showed that a significant majority wanted to get feedback on the former, so confirming the self-verification bias. Interestingly, Swann et al.'s (1989) results also indicated that the participants preferred to hear feedback that confirmed their negative self-perceptions over information which was positive but discrepant. It appeared that the participants would prefer to confirm what they already thought, even if it was detrimental to their potential well-being.

This implied a more strategic approach to self-presentation. However, it is supported by evidence suggesting that individuals are motivated by the desire to augment or maintain their power base – both in respect to other people (Jones & Pittman, 1982), or maximise rewards and reduce potential punishments (Schlenker, 1980).

Contrary to this however, research has indicated that most self-presentation is not intentionally deceptive, but that people emphasise those sides which will result in the desired outcome, whilst also withholding information that might impute the presentation (Leary, Tchividjian, & Kraxberger, 1994). They argued that this disinclination to outright lie is partially due to ethical considerations, but also because it carries the risk that their presentation might be found to be false, and their version of self discredited (Goffman, 1959).

Theories of motivation to present a version of self have tended to focus on two different areas – comparing oneself to a different version of self, and the needs of the existing self. In the former category are self-Discrepancy Theory (Higgins, 1987), Possible Selves (Markus, 1977), and the Theory of Temporal self-Appraisal (Wilson & Ross, 2000), whilst in the latter is Self Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000)

Self-discrepancy theory, as proposed by Higgins (1987), is a model that lends itself both to the idea of the self as being a structure, as well as a process. In section 1.4.2, the 'actual', 'ideal', and 'ought' were considered as structural elements, providing a template for futures selves, but at the same time, they are also motivational elements and so are included here. The mechanisms behind self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) are largely drawn from Cognitive Dissonance theory (Festinger & Carlsmith, 1959; Festinger, 1962) which argued that on experiencing a discrepancy between two cognitions / actions, emotional discomfort is experienced. This effect can be very

powerful, with research showing discrepancies between the actual and ideal self having been linked to depressive disorders (Moretti & Higgins, 1999). The cognitive dissonance motivates the individual to change either their cognitions or behaviours in such a way as to reduce the emotional discomfort experienced.

Drawing on this mechanism, the theory argued that the individual can experience consonance or dissonance between the Ideal, Actual, and Ought versions of self, with magnitude and accessibility being key determinants in the level of discomfort experienced (Higgins, 1987). So, the presentation of self is mediated by a desire to reduce levels of experienced dissonance. However, one charge against this mechanism is that it reduces the individual to little more than a deterministic response mechanism, with little detail as to the actual method by which the dissonance or consonance is processed. However, this is more relevant to Festinger and Carlsmith's (1959) original work, and does not invalidate the usefulness of the Ideal, Actual, Ought constructs.

These versions of self fit well with the idea of Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Wurf & Markus, 1991) that, as before, have already been discussed. The motivational value of possible selves is that they can act as motivators for future behaviour, and also be an evaluative template against which the current version of self can be judged. Although traditionally kept distinct, there is no reason why self-discrepancy theory and possible selves cannot be combined, with research showing that an Ideal possible self could exist that acts as a motivator for future behaviour, and as a point of evaluation for the current self (James, 1890; Zentner & Renaud, 2007). Using the Behaviour Change Framework (Stein & Markus, 1996) that required that individual to recognise the negative trends that have led to their current situation, and of a need to change those trends, research has indicated that possible selves can have real world applications. When looking at an offender population, results indicated that by creating 'hoped for' possible selves and avoiding 'feared' selves, offending rates were significantly reduced (Abrams & Aguilar, 2005).

The theories of 'comparison' are not, in themselves, substantial enough to form a theory of self although extensive research has used them in examine the presentation of self in online spaces. However, when used as part of the self as Structure / self as Process model being presented in this thesis, the use of 'other selves' has more coherence. Given that they represent activations of different nodes (and networks) with

the self-schemata web, they also fit well with the Self Memory System (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Conway, 2005).

Whilst theories of comparison relate to the self-concept and draws from the idea of the self as a Structure, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2008) relates to the self as a Process. It argued that people have three basic needs – autonomy (a desire to control one's own life), competence (a desire to experience mastery), and relatedness (a desire to interact with, and be connected to, others), with research showing that overall, people lower in self-determination showed higher levels of self-presentation (Lewis & Neighbors, 2005). Furthermore, there are three orientations, based on the basic needs (R. M. Ryan & Deci, 2000), with autonomously oriented individuals tending to act in line with their true desires. It is a positive indicator of self-determination, and is associated with less self-presentation, although research showed were higher levels of apologising, although this was seen as being less defensive and instead a willingness to take responsibility (Hodgins & Knee, 2002). The controlled orientation was a negative indicator of self-determination and associated with lower self-actualisation, plus an external locus of control. It was linked to strategies that bolstered the self-concept (i.e. self-promotion, enhancement, ingratiation), together with increased levels of intimidation (Knee, Neighbors, & Vietor, 2001). Finally, the Impersonal orientation was defined as being negatively correlated with self-determination, and associated with depression (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and powerlessness (McHoskey, 1999). It was associated with strategies presenting the self in a negative light, with less self-promotion, more disclaimers, apologies, and sandbagging, together with trying to gain sympathy and gaining assistance (supplication).

Research has looked at applying Self-determination theory to computer games (Przybylski, Rigby, & Ryan, 2010), with results indicating that games are intrinsically motivating and provide a suitable environment where players can satisfy their need for competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Przybylski et al. (2010) also linked gaming to temporarily increased wellbeing, indicating a beneficial impact to gaming. In chapter two, further research is explored looking at motivations to play MMOs, with a number of possible reasons being advanced. However, the offline motivational theories of self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987), possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008) all have value and are also considered.

1.7 Conclusion

This chapter has looked at the presentation of the offline self, with a view to establishing how applicable offline theory might be to the presentation of self in MMOs. Early research adopted a symbolic interactionist approach, and considered the role of the audience with theorists such as Cooley (1902), Mead (1934), and Goffman (1959) featuring prominently. Later research embraced cognitive perspectives, with the development of self-schemas (Markus, 1977) and autobiographical memory (Pillemer, 1992), with the later development of the self memory system by Conway and Pleydell-Pearce (2000). Also discussed have theories on different versions of self (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986), together with how the self might be presented to other people (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

However, this body work is disjointed with no overall strategy that combines the structural (cognitive) elements of the self, with the procedural (performative) elements. Instead, there are separate theories that only tell one aspect of the story. This is a gap in the current research, and the thesis will be addressing it, by looking at both the structure and process of presenting a version of self in MMOs.

In the next chapter, the presentation of self in different online spaces will be considered, with a view to establishing the value of considering the self as both structure and process in such environments.

Chapter Two: Review of Research and Theory into the Online Self

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter looks at the literature concerning the presentation of self in virtual spaces, with four aims:

1. To look at affordances within virtual spaces
2. To analyse the literature regarding the presentation of self in these spaces
3. To justify the choice of MMOs as the virtual environment to investigate
4. To provide a detailed background to the research questions

The chapter examines the nature of virtual spaces, and how the space facilitates or inhibits the presentation of self. The different virtual spaces and elements thereof are considered with reference to the self as a structure, and self as a process. Finally, an argument is made for the choice of MMOs as the environment for examining presentation of self, and the research questions are presented.

2.2 Affordances

The term 'Affordance' was coined by Gibson (1979) who, arguing from an interactionist perspective of perception and action, proposed that objects and environments have characteristics which enable (afford) different behaviours, where an Affordance is relationship between the world and an actor within it. Objects were seen as achieving meaning through the affordances that they provided since without the capacity to interact – without an affordance – an object is merely in the background of the person's consciousness (Miller, 2007). However, affordances can be both real and perceived, with real ones being those that are physically manifested (Norman, 1999). Perceived affordances included 'Social affordances' relating to what the environment will allow, as a product of its connection to reality (will the person be found out?), the nature of the space (can the player do they wish in the space provided), and the audience (how can they interact with the person?).

As with Goffman's (1959) argument on the self, it is questionable whether affordances arise from the environment or from the actors. In a physical space, the elements of that space facilitate and inhibit certain actions – i.e. the laws of physics will disabuse someone who believes they can fly. However, in virtual spaces, there are no physical restrictions on what can be achieved. However, there is a critical difference between the offline and online worlds – in the former, construction of the real world self can be time consuming (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005) and limited by one's physical body, both in what can be achieved, but also what can be claimed (Donath, 1999). In the offline world, unrestrained by the limitations of the real world, forming an online version of self is relatively easy (Kim, Zheng, & Gupta, 2011), and it is easier to distance oneself from unfavourable opinion by keeping different audiences separated (Brennan & Pettit, 2004).

The Internet enables different affordances based on the platform used. Joinson (2003) argued there are five dimensions relevant to understanding the link between a platform and behaviour exhibited therein – synchronicity (the immediacy of the communication), the cues transmitted (the richness of the communication), bandwidth constraints (how much information can be sent), anonymity (visual/personal anonymity), and sender-recipient exclusivity (who can see the message). By assessing each space, the extent that it enables the individual to represent the self can be established. This is because people are drawn to the virtual space which suits them – text communication attracts 'verbalizers', whilst 'visualizers' prefer avatar based interaction (Suler, 2002).

However, there is another risk in thinking of the different spaces as necessarily analogous to each other. Given the different types of virtual environment (Joinson, 2003), there is a risk of "conceptual leakage" (Wakeford, 1997, p.54), when a concept relevant to one virtual space is unthinkingly applied to another (Whitty, 2008). MMOs are entirely separate from other virtual environments and caution is required in over-eagerly applying erroneous concepts.

2.3 The Virtual self

In this section, the presentation of self in virtual environments is discussed, starting with the representation of the offline self across virtual spaces. The role of

avatars is also examined, as is self-disclosure, and the impact of these actions. Each different space is compared to examining how their affordances influence the presentation of self, and with reference to the self as a structure and / or process.

2.3.1 Avatars

'Avatar' is a Sanskrit word which can be loosely translated as 'manifestation of the Supreme being' and is apt in describing the representation of the player within a virtual world. Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold (2012, p.68) defined an avatar as an "interactive, customizable 3D humanoid" – a broadly acceptable definition, although not acknowledging the possibility of non-humanoid avatars as can be seen in Second Life; indeed, an avatar need not be a physical representation of the individual, but can be a name, email address or other image (Bailenson, Yee, Blascovich, & Guadagno, 2008). The form and function of the avatar is dependent on the affordances provided by the virtual environment, with the version of self dependent on both the affordances of a particular space, plus the motivations for using that space. This was illustrated in the impact of game designers upon the initial presentation of self, with Ducheneaut et al. (2009) nothing that WoW had 13 character races to choose from, whilst Maple Story (MS) only had one.

Avatars are the embodiment of the self in a virtual space (Whalen, Petriu, Yang, Petriu, & Cordea, 2003), designed and controlled by a human, but enabling presence in the virtual world (Schroeder, 2011), and providing a means of interacting with the environment and other users. However, this is not a passive relationship, but one where players are active participants, which enables a process of 'experiential merger' of the player and avatar (Klimmt, Hefner, Vorderer, Roth, & Blake, 2010). The idea proposed that the player replaces his real life identity with that of the game character, and takes on the 'attributes' of the game character – so becoming more adventurous or brave. Gee (2003) proposed the existence of three 'bodies' in this respect; first, the avatar in the game world whose success depends on both the player, and the game environment. The second identity is the player in the real world, with the third being the 'projective identity'. This projective identity is placed on the character in the game, making the character a work in progress, defined by what the player wants the character to become.

This 'third' entity represents more than just a physical representation, and can include psychological embodiment, as experienced through experiential merger (Klimmt et al., 2010). This means that ideas about the self from autobiographical memory (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), together with aspirations for future selves (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986) can be projected onto the avatar. So, in the online world, the avatar and individual have a symbiotic relationship, where neither can exist without the other.

Avatars have been associated with their being powerful motivating agents with people preferring to have control over their appearance of their avatar (Schroeder, 2002), an act that has been linked to game enjoyment (Bailey, Wise, & Bolls, 2009), with considerable periods of time spent in customizing them and interacting with people (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009; Turkay & Adinolf, 2010). There are gender differences, with females creating more detail than males, with both genders focusing on gendered features relating to physical features and clothes, rather than producing an accurate body representation (Villani, Gatti, Confalonieri, & Riva, 2012). In the Villani et al. (2012) study adolescent students were asked to draw pictures of her / him-self using 'Drawing Me', then create an avatar using professional software, but the results should be treated with caution. No measures of the students real life physique were taken (height, weight, BMI), and the software contained stylised avatars which would be influenced by the preconceptions of the artists who designed them. As such, the comparison between drawn and designed avatars would not be entirely conclusive. The intended function of the avatar also influences its construction, with results showing that people will purposely mould their avatar. Blogging avatars were more accurate in reflecting the participant's appearance and lifestyle, whilst dating avatars emphasised physical attractiveness and gaming ones intellectual status (Vasalou, Joinson, & Pitt, 2009). The authors concluded that each type of virtual environment enables specific self-presentational styles.

So, avatars enable the user to exist within virtual environments, and by enabling presence within the virtual environment the goals of the user can be achieved, whether that is through experiential merger (Klimmt, Hefner, & Vorderer, 2009), or projective identity (Gee, 2003). They are the placeholders for the versions of self created by the self memory system, set within an environment where the performance of the self can be played out.

2.3.2 Presenting the Self in Contemporary Virtual Spaces

Critical to the presentation of self is how the concept of self is represented internally – a discussion which necessarily includes reference to the offline concept of self, since even if the user does not replicate themselves online, there must be an offline self to refer to. All environments contain affordances that reflect an inherent capacity to enable behaviours; within the offline world the individual is limited by physical laws, but in virtual spaces without such physical restrictions people can construct alternate versions of self, where only the specific affordances limit what can be achieved. Critical in this process it is Lévi-Strauss's (2008) notion of Bricolage where the bricoleur utilises whatever materials are at hand – omitting, transposing and re-arranging elements of the self as necessary to achieve the desired effect (Chandler, 1998). So, in analysing different virtual spaces as a vehicle for representing the self, it is essential to consider both the affordances that a space provides, and how those opportunities can be used in the endless reconstruction of the self.

General Internet Usage

Early research looking at types of self on the internet concluded that people could explore aspects of the true self over the Internet (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Turkle, 1995); in the adolescent population, research showed that teenagers explored their concept of self on the Internet, with those with less defined self-concepts spending more time doing so, which was argued to be through using the time to develop their understanding of self (Israelashvili, Kim, & Bukobza, 2012). Bargh et al. (2002) argued that representation of the true self was facilitated by the anonymity of the Internet, where people did not present idealised versions of self, but instead created honest versions, although Chester (2004a) reported that there was some concealment or exaggeration of traits.

Other research exploring how individuals represented their version of self online looked at the impact of personality factors (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Ong et al., 2011). Results showed that introverts and neurotic people could more easily express their real self online (Amichai-Hamburger, Wainapel, & Fox, 2002), with Marriott and Buchanan (2014) speculating that this was because introverts tend to be shy in face-to-face social situations – a feature absent when online. Behavioural differences were also

noted, with people with high levels of neuroticism being more likely to use messaging systems due to their asynchronous nature, so allowing more time to create a response (Ehrenberg, Juckes, White, & Walsh, 2008). This is reminiscent of Suler's (2002) position that people inhabit the space that suits them the best – so 'verbal' people will prefer text-based communication, whereas 'visualizers' will prefer avatars.

Researchers also looked at why people chose to engage in creating a self on the Internet, with anonymity, a lack of requirement for physical proximity and (sometimes) asynchronous nature of Internet communication being cited as potential reasons (Bargh et al., 2002; Suler, 2002). For example, marginalised groups with concealable stigmas such as a mental disorder were shown to use online support groups more than those without a stigma, or those with non-concealable stigmas (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). It was hypothesised that those with non-concealable stigma are able to identify other group members, and realise they were not alone. For those with a concealable stigma, there was no such visible support so online support groups were used, spurred on by a lack of acceptance in the offline world, and by the ease of communication in the online one (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006). By engaging in such groups, individuals were able to create a version of self which satisfied unfilled desires in the offline world (Wan & Chiou, 2006), an opportunity associated with increased self-acceptance (Rosenmann & Safir, 2006) and improved offline social relationships (McKenna et al., 2002).

Other literature suggested that we position ourselves online in such a way that there are several identities available within the same context. The choice of which 'self' to show is motivated by the desired impression to make in that particular situation – as Goffman (1959) argued, the self is bound to specific interactive moments. In their research, Talamo and Ligorio (2001) examined the conversations of 38 students and teachers who had taken part in an educational virtual environment called 'Euroland', over an eight month period. Their results found that virtual environment users manipulated their avatars for one of four reasons – (1) to try out different avatars, (2) to establish stable usage of an avatar, (3) as required in a specific situation, and finally (4) in an effort to replicate themselves. Their conclusion was that the self in virtual environments was not a stable construct but varied across the type of social interaction, the space being used and the motivation for being there. This has also been proposed by other research, with Belk (2013) arguing there is no singular core self when online but instead, as Ahuvia (2005) and Bahl and Milne (2010) argued, there is evidence for

'multiphrenic' selves, suggesting the possibility that the multiple online selves are mirroring offline versions of self.

Websites

There is evidence that websites can be used to present versions of self (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006; Vazire & Gosling, 2004), with a high degree of flexibility in the focus of the homepage (Dominick, 1999). Commonly though, homepages follow a template (Dillon & Gushrowski, 2000), with key elements expected (a Title, an email address, etc.), with research indicating that homepages provide an accurate impression of the owner's identity (Vazire & Gosling, 2004).

Unlike MMOs that are immersive worlds, the affordances of homepages are significantly different; the self is mediated through the creation of social texts, both literal and figurative, where the user constructs the self through words, pictures, and videos (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Drawing on the concept of the bricoleur (Lévi-Strauss, 2008), homepages can be continually constructed and contain multiple, potentially conflicting versions of self on different pages (Wynn & Katz, 1997). Whilst homepages are not necessarily constrained by the offline world of the individual, other virtual spaces such as dating websites are more restricted; the individual has to negotiate the affordances of the virtual space so that self-promotion can occur (Vasalou et al., 2009), but that can be supported if the individuals meet up in real life. Dating website users are required to tread a fine line between presenting their actual self and desired self (Whitty, 2008), which if found to be discrepant would discredit the entire performance (Goffman, 1959).

Given this expectation, research indicated that individuals tend to self-promote, presenting a version of self that is conducive to their aims (Vasalou et al., 2009). Within that, users highlighted their best features whilst remaining within the boundaries of truthfulness (Ellison et al., 2006; Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, & McCabe, 2005). The work of Yurchisin et al. (2005) also found that individuals tended to re-create their offline identities on dating websites, with participants testing out possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) by adding desired properties to their profiles, with feedback being important in shaping that process. In research, little evidence of intentional deception was found, although subjective terms (attractiveness) could be generously

interpreted, as could somewhat arbitrary decisions taken by the website (age bands) which some participants saw as discriminatory (Ellison et al., 2006). This research was not without fault though, with a self-selecting and self-reporting sample of 34 participants – both choices that could potentially have skewed the data, not least given a predilection for 'bending' the truth by some of the participants.

In other homepages the intent and affordances can be different; research into academic websites indicated that at least 70% of academics have a homepage (Tang, Zhang, & Yao, 2007). The focus was on the professional status of the user, with prominent University branding, cropped pictures (Hyland, 2011), and the primary function of showcasing the competence of the individual (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984). However, they can still be a space to present the self, with female academics experiencing greater freedom online (Arnold & Miller, 2001). This finding concurs with existing research that indicates that a primary reason for why individuals create and maintain a homepages is to present a version of self (Schmitt, Dayanim, & Matthias, 2008; Weibel, Wissmath, & Groner, 2010), although other motives including personal enjoyment (Jung, Youn, & McClung, 2007), social interaction (Papacharissi, 2002b), developing friendships (Schmitt et al., 2008), and the challenge of designing a webpage (Weibel et al., 2010).

Overall, websites can act as a space for the presentation of self but given the different types of websites that exist there are a multitude of affordances associated with those presentations of self. Those affordances are illustrated in what the individual is trying to achieve, and the strength of the connection to the real world, which means that those spaces can both facilitate or inhibit the self that can be sustained. In all cases, both the structural and process bound elements of self are involved; the individual must access autobiographical memories (Conway & Rubin, 1993; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) and schemata (Markus, 1977), and then choose a way to enact the goals of the presentation of self in the most efficient manner (Jones & Pittman, 1982).

Blogging / Micro-Blogging

Blogs (and social networking sites – SNS) have superseded homepages as the primary means of presenting the self on the Internet (Chen, 2012), primarily due to the fluid nature of blogs (Viégas, 2005), in comparison to the comparatively static nature of

a homepage (Morris, 2009). Research into bloggers indicated that the majority of bloggers are male (62%) and educated to degree level (62%) (Bronstein, 2013), although this was a self-selecting sample from a specific cultural group (Latin Americans), so the results should be interpreted with caution given their cultural specificity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The popularity of blogging has been reflected in the growth of micro-blogging sites, with Twitter experiencing 750% per annum growth in its earlier years (Morris, 2009), and a current population of almost 646m (Twitter statistics.2014). Java, Song, Finin, and Tseng (2007) found that micro-blogging sites uses converse with other, report news (Honeycutt & Herring, 2009), and share information (Zhao & Rosson, 2009). However, no evidence was found of using Twitter to maintain friendships (Johnston, Chen, & Hauman, 2013), with people less likely to share confidential information (Ehrlich & Shami, 2010).

Blogging is typified by a high degree of self-disclosure (Chen, 2012), which has been linked to the presentation of self (Hollenbaugh, 2011). Typically a high degree of personal information is revealed (Nardi, Schiano, Gumbrecht, & Swartz, 2004) , with Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright (2005) finding that 92.2% of blogs provided personal information on the first page; younger bloggers tend to reveal more (Lenhart et al., 2011; Ma, 2006), and recreate their offline self (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). This is facilitated by the affordances that blogs provide – users can chose to remain anonymous, increasing self-disclosure (Child & Agyeman-Budu, 2010; Qian & Scott, 2007). In addition, physical invisibility is seen as increasing disinhibition, even if anonymity is not maintained (Suler, 2004). However, other research has shown that bloggers do not necessarily opt to be anonymous, posting their real name and photographs (Bronstein, 2013).

Blogs can also allow for the reader to engage with bloggers (Viégas, 2005), and through this social interaction (McCullagh, 2008) inform the presentation of self (Sanderson, 2008). However, bloggers generally have no control over who can access their blog, with the subsequent lack of ability to define their audience, leading to assumptions being made about their audience. This indicates that blogs were not as connected as might be thought, and often are individual expressions of the self (Efimova, Hendrick, & Anjewierden, 2005; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004), with people being able to express themselves more honestly than offline (B. A. Nardi et

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al., 2004). However, they can be used for multiple reasons, with academic blogs being used for pedagogic purposes (Miceli, Murray, & Kennedy, 2010), providing technical advice, and critiquing the academic culture (Ewins, 2005; Mewburn & Thomson, 2013).

So, blogging is functional, with intended audiences for the messages being provided; they represents an evolution from websites, in terms of the fluid nature that infuses blogs, particularly micro-blogs such as Twitter. However, as with websites, they are also defined by their affordances, the core one being that the version of self in blogs might be expected to be tied to an offline self.

Social Networking Sites

This section aims to review the literature on SNS across a number of factors that relate to the presentation of self. Initially, research into personality traits and SNS are considered, before the literature on versions of self is studied. Finally, the affordances of SNS are discussed, together with motivations for the presentation of self on such sites.

SNS are the dominant means of presenting the self online, with 50+% of internet users on SNS, with 90% of those on Facebook (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Hampton, Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011) which, as of June 2014, had a membership of 1.32 billion (Facebook, 2014). SNS are used to connect to, and interact with other people with early research reporting typical usage of 20 minutes per day, with two thirds of users logging in more than once a day (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). By 2012, this had increased to one hour 20 minutes per day, checking five times a day on average (Junco, 2012), indicating the increased offline impact on users. Typically SNS share three characteristics; first, the user has a profile on the system; second, the user is connected to other users, and three, the connections between users are visible (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2008). In addition, user participation is critical (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009), with SNS providing a platform where users can communicate (Joinson, 2008).

Personality factors have been investigated, with extraversion being linked with higher levels of SNS use (Amichai-Hamburger & Vinitzky, 2010; Wilson, Fornasier, & White, 2010), frequency of use (Gosling, Augustine, Vazire, Holtzman, & Gaddis, 2011), and number of Facebook friends (Ong et al., 2011). Neuroticism has been

positively correlated with use of social media (Wehrli, 2008), although an analysis of the SNS habits of 261 students using the Ten-item personality inventory (a variant of the big 5 personality variables - Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann Jr, 2003) found no difference between neurotic and extravert users in the amount of time spent on Facebook (Michikyan, Subrahmanyam, & Dennis, 2014). However, other research has found inconsistent ratings concerning SNS users with high neuroticism levels (Back et al., 2010), suggesting a malleable presence on SNS sites and a strategic, contextual presentation of self. This has been supported by DeAndrea and Walther (2011) who argued that some SNS users are aware that online self-presentations can be misleading, despite assertions that their own are accurate. However, whilst personality research can provide some clues as to SNS usage, it does not clarify how users present the self in these virtual spaces. Additionally, personality variables have come under criticism for a number of points, including a reliance of self-report measures (McAdams, 1992), failing to account for situational or motivational influences (Dweck & Leggett, 1988), and a lack of causal explanations (McAdams, 1992). SNS participants reported that their profiles were accurate representations of their offline self, (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006; Stern & Taylor, 2007), although other research found users drawing upon past experience to create a variety of versions of self (Boudreau, 2013). Research on the German SNS 'OSN StudiVZ' agreed that users tend to create a broadly accurate version of self (Back et al., 2010; also see Weisbuch, Ivcevic, & Ambady, 2009), although there can be some idealisation (S. Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008). As Wilson, Gosling, and Graham (2012) suggested, one reason for this may be due to affordances inherent in the social system – that offline friends would know if the user were lying, and as a product of this, user profiles tend to be genuine (Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). An interesting approach has been put forward by Zhao et al. (2008) who examined Facebook and argued that these possible selves are neither the 'true selves' as were seen in MUDs (Turkle, 1995), nor the 'real selves' potentially seen in online interactions (Bargh et al., 2002). From this, Zhao et al. (2008) contend that True selves, Real selves, and possible selves are products of different situations rather than characteristics of different individuals.

However, users presenting a specific version of self was widespread (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Pempek et al., 2009) although the affordances of SNS do not allow for the freedom of expression available during the early years of the Internet (Turkle, 1994). Then, computer mediated communication (CMC) was detached from the offline

world and content self-generated, but now the majority of material on an individual is other-generated and linked to the offline world (Stefanone, Lackaff, & Rosen, 2008). This other-generated information could subvert the self that is being presented (Besmer & Lipford, 2010; Ramirez Jr & Walther, 2009). With the increasing size of the potential audience, creating the right impression can become problematic (Binder, Howes, & Sutcliffe, 2009), and as the amount of other-generated information increases, there is a concurrent increase in the chances of different spheres overlapping. This could be precarious, with warranting theory arguing that other-generated information is more credible than user-generated information, since people recognise that the user will be trying to influence them (Walther & Parks, 2002; Walther, Van Der Heide, Hamel, & Shulman, 2009); however, not all research has supported it, with Utz (2010) finding no evidence for the warranting effect with self-generated information.

One strategy identified for moulding the self online was by filtering the information posted (Chen & Marcus, 2012; Utz, 2010), with Suler (2008) arguing that images were potent informal ways of expressing the self, although text remained critical to intentional social interaction. Techniques included choosing good photos to upload (Dorethy, Fiebert, & Warren, 2014), untagging oneself from unfavourable photos (Binder et al., 2009), and claiming innocence vis-à-vis compromising images (Crocker & Park, 2003) – the 'excuse' self-presentation tactic (Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

Dorethy et al. (2014) argued that photos can provide an initial point of reference for social interaction; in their research, a group of Facebook users were asked to select every third friend in their friend list, and record data concerning their picture posts – such as the picture type, and number of 'likes'. Results showed that a significant number of photos were positive in nature (69%), with 25% neutral, and only 5% negative in tone. They speculated that users were deliberately choosing positive photos to represent themselves, and untagging unfavourable ones, in order to present a flattering image of themselves – a conclusion also reached by Pempek et al. (2009). However, it might be considered that the Dorethy et al. (2014) research was partially flawed in that users were rating their own friends images, so introducing the possibility that fealty to their friends and prior knowledge might have skewed the interpretations provided. Another strategy for presenting the self, as mentioned, is via status updates, which Carr, Schrock, and Dauterman (2012, p.180) argued are different because they are "directed at a specific audience: the user's network", so allowing for the targeted influencing of social opinion (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). In addition, updates were asynchronous, so allowing time to

craft the desire statement (Walther, 2007), and were likely to involve elements of self-disclosure, but at the same fewer negative emotions (Bazarova, Taft, Choi, & Cosley, 2013).

Research looking at why people engaged in the presentation of self on SNS has focused on a number of ideas with Leary and Kowalski (1990) arguing that self-presentation is goal driven and, drawing from Social Exchange theory (Emerson, 1976), motivated by a balancing of costs and rewards. One goal in using SNS is in getting the attention of other users (Stefanone et al., 2008; Utz, Tanis, & Vermeulen, 2012), with the desire to present the self on SNS as important (Hew, 2011; Smith & Kidder, 2010), though the individually ascribed value of that goal will also influence motivation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). This is driven by a desire to be socially accepted, with criticism and social rejection as possible consequences of an unsuccessful presentation (Binder et al., 2009).

The primary motives for engagement in SNS is social interaction, with a body of research indicating that social interaction is critical in SNS usage (Carpenter, Green, & LaFlam, 2011; Sheldon, Abad, & Hinsch, 2011). Typically, users will communicate directly with a small group of friends, whilst maintaining passive ties with a larger group (Burke, Marlow, & Lento, 2009), a position reminiscent of Granovetter's (1973) strong and weak ties. Gosling (2009) supported this argument, proposing that the popularity of SNS may be due to a desire to maintain social bonds. It follows that SNS use is motivated by a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012), with dissatisfaction of existing levels of belonging shown to motivate engagement in SNS (Sheldon et al., 2011). This is an argument drawing on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008), which was also reflected in research which found that an increased number of status updates reduced loneliness, due to the feeling of being connected to friends, even if they did not actually reply (Deters & Mehl, 2013).

Typically SNS interaction is characterised by maintaining existing friendships, not attempting to make new ones (Carpenter et al., 2011; Chan & Virkki, 2014), perhaps indicating a shift in perception concerning virtual spaces. Whereas research into MUDs (Turkle, 1995) saw such spaces as brave new worlds, it is possible that people might not distinguish between online and offline spaces in such a way. Research into why people do not use SNS has been very meagre, but after investigating the SNS habits of two US high school years, Baker and White (2011) found that 15% of participants specifically

did not like the idea of presenting a version of self online; other reasons including lack of motivation, a preference for other activities, and baulking at the amount of time required – although the results should be created with some caution given that only two academic years were included in the study.

Overall, there has been extensive research into SNS, which suggests that these virtual spaces can act as a place for the presentation of self. Due to the close proximity of these spaces to reality, users tend to present relatively accurate reflections of themselves with active manipulation of the image produced – through status updates, photo editing, and the monitoring (and adjustment) of other-generated information. The primary reason for engaging with SNS does not seem to be making new friends or exploring versions of self, but keeping in contact with existing friends (Carpenter et al., 2011; Chan & Virkki, 2014) and being in contact with as many people as possible (Utz et al., 2012). Like other mundane virtual spaces, such as Blogs or Micro-blogs, SNS are tied to reality and so, through this association, will create affordances in what the SNS user can claim as their own.

Second Life

This section looks to provide some insight into Second Life (SL), by discussing the nature of the boundary between SL and the offline world, followed by a discussion of the versions of self that are typically created in the virtual environment.

SL is a persistent virtual environment developed by Linden Labs in 2003 which, like MMOs, does not have a storyline, quests, or pre-existing social structures (Jennings & Collins, 2007). They share the feature of having a graphical format so players can 'exist' within the virtual environment (Boellstorff, 2008), and it is this facet that above all others separates MMOs and SL from homepages and SNS. Furthermore, there is an expectation that such virtual environments will be increasingly popular, so making research on it important (Bainbridge, 2007). Demographic evidence found that the average SL user will have a primary avatar, with two alternative avatars (Ducheneaut et al., 2009), with 58% visiting on a daily basis, and very little indication of gender swapping (6% of females and 7% of males), with users having been there for approximately 13 months (Linares, Subrahmanyam, Cheng, & Guan, 2011). Au (2007) reported that 64% of users felt able to construct a different self in SL, supporting the

notion of actively constructed selves (Leary & Tangney, 2003). Other research indicated that users of SL tend to replicate their offline self (Aas, Meyerbröker, & Emmelkamp, 2010). Typically, it was a younger and thinner version of themselves, with avatars seen as more extrovert, agreeable, conscientious, open, and less neurotic (Gilbert, Foss, & Murphy, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2014), an effect also seen by Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler (2007) with respect to MMOs. Typically, hair and eye colour were the mostly commonly swapped aspects of the self, and alts engaged in practical and admin activities (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). As with the later Gilbert et al. (2014) research, some caution is advised; in Gilbert et al.'s (2011) research questionnaire statements assumed that players saw their avatar as separate from themselves, with statements such as 'my avatar is *more open than me*'. However, as Evans (2011) showed, not all players see their avatars as distinct from themselves, so statements such as 'My avatar is X' would be nonsensical, likely resulting either in incomplete questionnaires, or at best educated guesses.

Given SL's separation from the offline world, the boundary between the offline and online can be more clearly defined than with SNS or homepages. Players who kept firm boundaries between the real and virtual worlds were more likely to have separate versions of self, and typically the avatar facilitated the expression of an aspect of their self not easily expressed offline (McLeod & Leshed, 2011). They reported that those who wanted greater anonymity in SL indicated that their virtual selves had more positive characteristics than they did, and were a 'truer' version than the player was in their real lives – a position reminiscent of earlier research indicating expression of the true self being facilitated by anonymity (Bargh et al., 2002).

Using a qualitative methodology (semi-structured interviews with 24 SL players), Gilbert et al. (2014) examined the use of multiple avatars in SL, with their results indicating that the use of avatars was co-ordinated to achieve the goals of the player. Of his sample, 83% tried to maintain a persistent and identifiable identity, indicating that whilst exploration of self may have been important, maintenance of an identifiable self was critical.

In contrast to earlier research (e.g. Turkle, 1995) which argued that virtual environments could support multiple versions of self, Schultze (2014) has argued that the body is not as disconnected as once thought. With the integration of advanced graphics into virtual environments, players have become re-embodied in those spaces

through their avatars (Belk, 2013). As a consequence, generally people's imaginations are limited by their corporeal experience, with most people replicating what they already know (O'Brien, 1999). This was also evidenced by Linares et al. (2011) who found that despite being able to create avatars on any shape or size, 84% of their sample had human avatars, with 56% replicating their offline appearance, and very little evidence of gender swapping. These results, together with those of Gilbert et al. (2014), indicated that SL users were unlikely to explore new versions of self, but were more likely to replicate their offline Selves, albeit with some 'improvements'. This makes for a critical difference between SL and MMOs, for whilst the former allows for the creation of fantastic creatures, it requires intentional effort on the part of the user to do so. With MMOs, choosing a 'pre-made' undead or elf avatar is an integral part of character creation, thereby automatically promoting the construction of differing versions of self.

Theoretical analyses of SL have been relatively sparse so far, but Martínez (2011) proposed three stages of avatar-identity formation – first, the 'pre-liminal' where the physical world is left behind, and the human agent is stripped of identifying factors (e.g. name, gender, appearance), with the chance to explore new aspects of self; second, the 'liminal' which is defined by avatar characteristics (appearance, movement – initially clumsy in SL, writing up a profile, group membership); and third, 'post-liminal' rites shown by enhanced groups interaction with development of social norms, etc. However, the pre-liminal stage is problematic, since it seems to infer that the human agent ceases to exist, which is patently not true – the player continues to exist in the offline world, but also has a presence in the online one. Martinez talked of one of her alts learning advanced content creation skills, but other avatars not doing so – but it was not the avatar learning the script, it was her, the offline person. Without her, the avatar would not be able to learn anything at all.

However, her core question of whether the presentation of self in SL is representational or performative is pertinent; the former implied a one-way relationship where the avatar represented the user in the virtual space (Vasalou, Joinson, Banziger, Goldie, & Pitt, 2008), whilst the latter position argued that the affordances of the space mediated the presentation of self, and the self is a combined construct (Schultze, 2014). It also relates to an argument from Chapter One – is there a stable core self, or is the self continually re-constructed? If it is the former, then why would context and place have an effect? In comparison, the performative paradigm implies an entanglement between the user and her/his digital body. Schultze (2014) found that people in Second

Life used both representational and performative functions, depending on the situation. The representational element was indicated by the replication of the offline physical self, with the specific intention of managing the impressions other people might have. The performative self was shown through the unconscious enactment of every day practices. For Schultze (2014), the study illustrated that the self is not a singular concept, but is contingent on the context.

Research into why people engage with SL has been sparse, though research indicated that there is a desire to create a 'better' version of self (Gilbert et al., 2014). It may be that SL, with its more naturalistic style (as opposed to the story driven, fantastical nature of MMOs) is not seen as overly different from real life, and therefore players do not create an entirely new version of self, but one close to the offline version (Linares et al., 2011). To compliment this conclusion, Gilbert et al. (2014) argued players seek to create a permanent identity in SL, through a primary avatar that provides a nominal 'identity' which can be socially recognised (Childs, 2011), and acts as a means of placing the physical self within the virtual world (Evans, 2011). There is evidence that this can have a positive impact on the offline self as well, with Francino and Guiller (2011) referencing a male SL player who, having played multiple female characters, had a better understanding of gender biases, which subsequently made him a 'better man' in real life.

Overall, the research on SL indicates that it is a viable environment for exploring concepts of self, but that this is only engaged with in a limited sense (Linares et al., 2011) and generally is exhibited through presenting improved versions of the offline self (Gilbert et al., 2014; McLeod & Leshed, 2011).

MUDs

Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) represent the precursor of MMOs, with the first recognisable MUD (Essex MUD) appearing in 1978, with the common features of having no beginning or end, no concept of winning, and having multiple connected users (Curtis, 1992). Research showed that players used MUDs to explore versions of self (Bruckman, 1992). Turkle (1994) argued that MUDs created the chance to construct and reconstruct the self as required, stating "There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to 'try out' new ones" (p.134). However, not all literature

was so equivocal with some research suggesting that small social interactions were typical of MUDs, with exploration of versions of self as uncommon (Schiano, 1999).

Despite this, research did indicate that some MUD players enjoyed playing roles in-game that they could not normally inhabit in the real world (Donath, 1999; Turkle, 1995), with players practicing characteristics they wished to exhibit offline (Clodius, 1997). Bartle (1996) suggested that, in exploring offline aspects of self, MUD players fell into one of four categories that explained their motivation for gaming – the achiever, the explorer, the socialiser, and the killer (PvP). This research was seminal and has influenced later work (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Yee, 2006b), but was limited by the lack of contemporary papers given its analysis of MUDs archetypes. Similarly, Robinson (2007) acknowledged that early theories have grown from MUD research, but that the MUD research (Turkle, 1995) represented a very specific population, which is no longer representative of the Internet population.

2.3.3 Presenting the Self in MMOs

MMOs represent a specific type of virtual environment that have a number of benefits, with the social elements of SNS, the immersive, graphical basis of SL, and structural elements that facilitate the presentation of self. Typically, gamers were seen as young, socially inept men, as Williams (2008) noted, but even early research understood this to be incorrect, with Griffiths, Davies, and Chappell (2004) reporting gaming ages from 12 to 70 years. However, Demetrovics et al. (2011) reported that in their study with 3,818 participants, 90.6% were male, with a mean age of 20.9 (SD=5.81), and 65.1% were single. This study was investigating motivations for MMO playing, which it might be argued have a younger gaming population, due to the time investment required. They also noted gender differences, with males spending more money on MMO game play, and enjoying them more (Chou & Tsai, 2007), though there is some disagreement over which gender tends to spend more time playing (D. Williams et al., 2008).

One noted motivation for MMO gaming is for social interaction (Fuster et al., 2012), where MMOs have been described as a 'third place', different to the home or work environments, enabling people in exploring diverse social relationships (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). They are, as Gee (2005) said, 'affinity spaces' where

information is freely shared and players interact, without the offline constraints of gender, age, or appearance (Yee, 2006b). They are a space where player can create a socially accepted version of self (Leary & Kowalski, 1990), either through the replication of self, or following a template of the desired image of the self (Jansz, 2005; Schau & Gilly, 2003). This potential of MMO is further enhanced, because in a virtual environment the user is in control (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010) and is doing impossible things (Boellstorff, 2008, albeit re. Second Life). The player can choose the avatar that represents him / herself in the game (Bryant & Akerman, 2009), with first characters being particularly important, both due to the act of exploring the game for the first time, with the concomitant action of joining the gaming community (Wang, Zhao, & Bamossy, 2009).

Finally, a specific element of the game playing community, though not one that will be explored in this thesis, are role-players. They represent a significant minority of the MMO gaming population but in terms of presentation of self, they form an interesting sub-section of the population. Role-playing, in its truest sense of the word, involves playing a role that is different to one's own. If an individual were to conduct a lecture, then she would be playing the role of being a 'lecturer'. However, if she were to conduct a lecture in the style of Professor Z, then she would be playing the role of being a 'lecturer' whilst also role-playing as Professor Z. This distinction has been missed in the limited research that has been conducted on role-players in MMOs so far. Role-playing requires that the individual actively distances themselves from any version of their self where, as Waskul (2006, p.334) commented, the role-player must embrace a point where "fantasy, imagination, and reality intersect". However, players often find it difficult maintaining a character that is entirely different to their offline self, with a tendency to drift towards the offline self. Of work done in the area, results indicate that role-players tend to be younger and female, with a tendency to use MMOs both as a means of negotiating versions of self – typically replicating the online self, and also as a coping mechanism when unable to gain social support and interaction offline (D. Williams et al., 2011).

The Avatar

An important distinction between MMOs and other virtual spaces is the graphical nature of the environment, with immersion in that space facilitated by direct control of a virtual presence – i.e. the avatar. As with SNS and SL, research into avatars in MMOs has tended to look at personality traits. Using a psychometric design Bessière et al. (2007) asked WoW players to rate their actual self, their main character and their ideal self on a series of questions relating to the Big Five personality inventory and physical features. Characters were seen by the players to be more conscientious, extravert, and less neurotic than themselves, and closer to ideal version of self. Similar results were found in later research (Ducheneaut et al., 2009), which also used measurements of players physical characteristics.

The methodology used in both studies is not without fault though, adapting as they did the Big Five Personality test for rating the actual self ("I see myself as someone who is full of ideas") and their main character ("I see my main character as someone who is always prepared"). Similarly to the Gilbert et al. (2014) research, this presumes two conditions however; first, players have thought about their characters to that extent, which was not guaranteed; and second, it is unclear whether there was a 'Not applicable' answer. If this was not available, the player was being forced to make a choice which they did not necessarily wish to make. In addition, both the Bessière et al. (2007) and Ducheneaut et al. (2009) research failed to provide any insights into why players saw their characters in any particular way. More than this however, the studies provide no indication of *how* players created and presented versions of self – something which this thesis seeks to remedy.

Research has also looked into personality traits of gamers with a view to establishing whether they predict in-game behaviour. Research found that personality variables based on the Five Factor model (McCrae & Costa, 1987) were not significant predictors of overall game behaviour, although offline agreeableness did predict in-game agreeableness (McCreery, Krach, Schrader, & Boone, 2012). McCreery et al. speculated that with no significant correlations being found, it was possible that the factors were not translating well into in-game behaviour. Earlier research had referred to this problem, with Yee, Ducheneaut, Nelson, and Likarish (2011) questioning whether personality variables could be applied to humanoids in fantasy environments. Using data mining techniques they acquired information about gamer behaviour and

found, contrary to the McCreery (2012) research, that personality traits were associated with in-game behaviours – e.g. extraversion with group activities, agreeableness with use of positive emotes, and conscientiousness with having vanity pets, etc. (See also Graham & Gosling, 2013; Mosley & Patrick, 2010). However, as with the McCreery et al. (2012) research, there is a lack of game awareness illustrated. 'Battleground games won' was a variable, but it ignores the fact that these were team events, so negating the concept of it being a metric of individual behaviour.

For such research, a key question is do stats in a database or even in-game behaviour correlated with a personality variable have anything meaningful to say? As with the Bessière et al. (2007) research, this approach is lacking in substance. It is only through talking to gamers about their experiences that it would be possible to understand their experiences, and how they present themselves in the game.

Character creation is a seminal moment in the presentation of self in MMOs, with research indicating that players can be influenced by their own offline identity (Waggoner, 2009), with considerable time spent creating the avatar (Yee, 2006b). Employing interviews, Waggoner's (2009) study interviewed two Morrowind (an offline MMO) players and found that neither of the participants saw their avatar as a "distinct, separate identity" (p.158), but instead acknowledged both the impact of previous gaming and their offline self in character creation. However, the research had some weaknesses which the current thesis seeks to remedy. The Morrowind research was conducted with only two participants, which given the level of analysis was too few. Finally, and most importantly with respect to Goffman's (1974) interpretation of the presentation of self, Morrowind is a single player MMO – a game played on a world scale but without the social interaction of traditional MMOs.

In terms of character creation, a distinction should also be drawn here between MMOs and SL, with the former restricting the character to set races and classes, whereas the latter has more latitude in what can be created (Kafai, Fields, & Cook, 2010). However, whilst SL does provide more initial freedom, 84% of SL players created humanoid avatars (Ducheneaut et al., 2009), suggesting that such freedoms were either not required or unappreciated. It is suggested that more structured nature of MMOs actually facilitates the presentation of self by providing a framework around which the player can build their desired self, so that a player who wishes to fulfil a destructive side of herself can do so through the archetypal mage. Race and class

choices are affordances – they potentially limit the player by restricting armour choices, and ways of playing the game, etc. but also enable them by creating a role (Goffman, 1961).

Research has indicated that the aesthetics of a character are highly important to players, though in the first generation and early second generation MMOs (e.g. Everquest and WoW respectively) characters looked very similar to other members of their race (Martin, 2005). This is a less valid with respect to more recent games (e.g. Guild Wars 2), but highlights two points; first, that the 'personal front' (Goffman, 1959) of a MMO character does not refer simply to character looks, but also attached symbolic elements that signify status within the game – such as name, Guild affiliation, and titles (Tronstad, 2008). Second, that whilst the personal front of an avatar does provide information to other players, they will rarely see the detailed physical features of the player's avatar. This feature is known by players when they create characters, and indicates that players put time and effort into their characters looks for themselves, not for other people – this means that the actual look of a character is relatively unimportant, but the meaning imbued into those looks is crucial.

Given the lack of exposure to the facial and physical features of game avatars, it is striking that players put so much time into creating them (Schroeder, 2002), and oftentimes with the aim of recreating their offline appearance (Vasalou, Joinson, & Pitt, 2007). In their study of WoW, Maple Story (MS), and SL, Ducheneaut et al. (2009) found that in all three environments, hair colour and styles was considered important, but there were variations; in WoW, facial characteristics were important, but skin tone was non-significant, in MS, the weapon was notable, whereas in SL the body and torso were key. The authors noted that in real life, the hair is the most malleable part of the body and a prominent identity marker; it is interesting therefore that 82.8% of participants did not choose to replicate their offline hair colour, indicating a willingness to try out different options in-game. Bearing in mind the previous point concerning the lack of exposure to facial features of game avatars, it is hypothesised that hair is even more important in MMOs, since the player generally looks at the back of their avatars head – so making it a focal point for avatar identification. This is shown in appendix 1.1 – a screenshot from Guild Wars 2, illustrating a typical orientation where the player looks over the avatar's shoulder.

Satisfaction with the look of one's character is critical in aiding in immersion within the game, since the avatar represents the link between the personal and social contexts (Taylor, 2003). Research has indicated a tendency to choose attractive races over unattractive ones, with Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, and Moore (2006b) finding that offline stereotypes concerning beauty are present in the gaming world. This is reminiscent of Nakamura's (2001) 'identity tourism' where individuals choose a physical version of self which is unavailable offline, in order to 'try it out'. However, what is defined as attractive is a highly ambiguous concept, and evidence is presented in this thesis that some players were more drawn to the traditionally uglier races.

Character creation is a seminal point where characters can be imbued with 'elements' of the players choosing, whether replicating their offline self or acting out some variation of self. This theme of offline influence can be seen in the offline physical attributes of players and their level of avatar personalisation. Ducheneaut et al. (2009) found that 32% of MMO participants wanted to reproduce elements of their offline physical self, though this percentage was substantially higher in Second Life (50%,). A principal components analysis of Ducheneaut et al.'s (2009) data revealed three factors relevant in customizing avatars – creating an Idealized version of self, Standing out from other players and Following a trend. There were significant differences between ages and genders as well – with females and older players more likely to create idealised versions of self, whilst males wanted to stand out; finally, compared to WoW and MS players, SL users were significantly more likely to create idealised versions of self.

It is clear that MMOs can provide an environment where players can present alternative versions of self, with one potential avenue of exploration lying in 'gender swapping', where the person plays a character of the opposite gender to her / his offline one. Data concerning its prevalence is somewhat variable, with figures between 15.5% (Huh & Williams, 2010) and 57% (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008) being found. Males are potentially four times more likely to engage in gender swapping (Mosley & Patrick, 2010), though found no correlation with personality traits. There were variations in the play style of those who gender swapped, with males likely to play healing roles or characters restricted to wearing light armour, potentially indicating a non-traditional approach to gaming. Interestingly, female players were more likely to choose characters that represented a rejection of violence, more than choosing characters which actively cared for others (Companion & Sambrook, 2008).

Having assessed some of the existing research into the presentation of the offline self in MMOs, it is clear that the ability to present the self is a valued opportunity for players. However, the existing research has been relatively superficial in nature and whilst providing some information about personality types, or versions of self that might be created, there has been little insight into *how* it actually occurs. This is a gap in the research that this thesis seeks to remedy, by looking at both the cognitive aspects of the self (the self as Structure) and the act of presenting the self (the self as Process).

Motivations for MMO gaming

As part of a model for understanding the presentation of self in MMO, it is necessary to understand not only how a player does this, but also why. Without this there is no context to their actions, and past, present, and future actions are in effect meaningless - in looking at the motivations for actions, the self-schema and autobiographical memories achieve significance.

A number of different reasons have been revealed as to why people value their characters in MMOs, such as to provide in-game utility (Livingston, Gutwin, Mandryk, & Birk, 2014), for aesthetic reasons (Fron, Fullerton, Morie, & Pearce, 2007), to explore game content (Fuster et al., 2012; Golub, 2010), to socialise (Fuster et al., 2012; Lin & Lin, 2011; Nardi & Harris, 2006), exploration ((Fuster et al., 2012; Hsu & Lu, 2007), escapism (Frostling-Henningson, 2009), as a possession (Fron et al., 2007; Wong, Tang, Livingston, Gutwin, & Mandryk, 2009), due to the time and energy invested (Livingston et al., 2014), as a means of having fun (Lin & Lin, 2011), and finally as a means of expressing the self (Demetrovics et al., 2011).

Bartle's (1996) MUD player types have proven useful in understanding MMO motivation, though the initial model was criticised for its lack of empirical validation (Griffiths et al., 2004; D. Williams et al., 2008). With this in mind, Yee (2006b) developed a 40-item questionnaire from the template, producing three overarching components, with 10 sub-components – Achievement (Advancement, Mechanics, Competition), Social (Socializing, Relationship, Teamwork), and Immersion (Discover, Role-playing, Customization, Escapism). The original model has been supported by further research, with achievement being found as the most significant predictor (Suznjevic & Matijasevic, 2010). Yee's et al. {{961 Yee, Nicholas 2012/a;}} model has

been criticised though, with Demetrovics et al. (2011) arguing that the model was limited by its adherence to the Bartle (1996) model, with little flexibility allowed for new concepts. Using a psychometric design Demetrovics et al. (2011) analysed data from 3,818 participants using Exploratory and Confirmatory Factor Analysis, producing a seven factor model – social, escape, competition, coping, skill development, recreation, competition, and socialising.

 Of recent research, only the Demetrovics (2011) study included the presentation of self as a variable within the model. Given that research has indicated experiencing the ideal-self in game increases motivation to play video games (Przybylski et al., 2012) as a product of reduced dissonance due to immersion within the game (Klimmt et al., 2010), it would seem that its inclusion is warranted in future research. In addition, the bulk of research looking at gaming motivation has been psychometric in nature, with only three of 55 papers reviewed by Boyle et al. (2012) using a qualitative methodology – although it is acknowledged this review paper looked at all game types. However, it does indicate that more in-depth research into MMO motivations would likely yield profitable data.

Social interaction is an integral part of MMOs with Guilds, group quests, and communal areas all representing game features designed to encourage social mingling (Nardi & Harris, 2006). It has been identified as a key factor for playing MMOs, with a variety of studies and methodologies supporting this conclusion, including studies using psychometrics (Fuster et al., 2012), qualitative (Frostling-Henningson, 2009; Y. Lin & Lin, 2011), and mixed methods (Chee, 2006; Livingston et al., 2014). Kolo and Baur (2004) reported that almost two thirds of their sample identified social interaction as important in their play, with the deriving of social support from online interactions also seen as significant (Longman, O'Connor, & Obst, 2009). There were some gender differences however, with males rating social interaction as more important than females (Jansz, Avis, & Vosmeer, 2010).

Not all research has been quite so equivocal concerning the social nature of MMOs however, with Ducheaneaut et al. (2006a) finding that, contrary to previous research, social activity is not the norm. They argued that people effectively use other players as an audience, as someone / something to watch, or as an easily accessible source of information or chat. From this perspective, social interaction is less co-operative and instead based on the manipulation of the other players for personal gain.

However, this research did not look at Guilds and Raid groups, where more extensive and complex social interaction can be found, so potentially leading to a one-sided perspective. Even here, affordances can play a role, with game design being proven to facilitate or hinder social interaction. Ducheneaut and Moore (2004) examined the MMO Star Wars: Galaxies and found interaction to be encouraged by the concentration of NPCs in one area, though genuine social interaction was limited since most players tended to meet up purely for functional purposes. The research was not able to access private conversations and group messages however, where private interaction might be expected to occur more frequently.

Psychological Impact

Gaming has been associated with positive outcomes including enjoyment, and making friends, as well as negatives ones such as less sleep, and interference with offline responsibilities (Smyth, 2007), with the avatar being of particular interest (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Vasalou et al., 2009). The ability to create the vehicle for the presentation of self is important, with evidence showing that participants who were given a choice of avatar showed better performance, increased motivation, and greater persistence in a task (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999). Moreover, it appeared that when a user identified with an avatar, its experiences were integrated into their offline concept of self (Hefner, Klimmt, & Vorderer, 2007), with Taylor (2003) showing that women playing more assertive roles in game translated this into their offline lives. Applied research using virtual reality headsets has confirmed this effect, with participants allocated an attractive avatar being more likely to self-disclosure, and those with taller avatars acting in a more aggressive manner in negotiation exercises (Yee & Bailenson, 2007; Yee, Bailenson, & Ducheneaut, 2009). Named the Proteus effect, the research showed that people will adopt characteristics from the avatar they are currently controlling (also in SL - Banakou, Chorianopoulos, & Anagnostou, 2009). As yet, research has only examined short-term effects however, and more research is required to ascertain long-term any consequences.

There is also an emotional impact to using virtual environments, with empathic responses (L. Taylor, 2011) and increased emotional involvement being reported on the basis of avatar use (Annetta & Holmes, 2006; Nowak & Biocca, 2003); this was reciprocated with the elicitation of an emotional responses being shown to underpin the

choice of many avatar characteristics (Vasalou et al., 2008), indicating that emotions both influence the playing of, and are influenced by the avatar. The popularity of MMOs has raised the question of why gamers play for such durable periods of time, with research concluding that individuals seek forms of entertainment that maintain or improve positive mood, or that serve as distractors to negative mood states (Zillman, 1988); in contrast, Carpentier et al. (2008) found that adolescents would generally choose a type of media that matched, rather than enhanced their existing mood. It is suggested that adolescents who have grown up with these 'new' types of media see them as normal, and not as something special, and therefore ascribe them no abilities to improve mood.

Although not a focus on this thesis, it should be acknowledged that gaming can have negative consequences on player's lives, with significant correlations having been found between MMO gaming and anxiety, depression, escape from the real world, interference with offline socialising, and reduced sleep quality (Allison, von Wahlde, Shockley, & Gabbard, 2006; Holtz & Appel, 2011; Li, Liau, & Khoo, 2012). At the same time, MMOs have been found to help those with shyness or social phobias (Pearce, 2006), to lead to online friendships (Holtz & Appel, 2011), and through social interaction, to protect the player from excessive solitary play and possible negative consequences thereof (Fuster et al., 2012).

2.4 MMOs as the Virtual Space of Choice

As indicated in previous sections, there has been an exponential growth in the use of social virtual spaces over the last ten years, with 18.5m active MMO subscriptions at the end of 2013 (van Geel, 2013). Whilst other virtual spaces have beneficial aspects, such as the sheer number of users on Facebook (Wilson et al., 2012), or the creative aspects of SL (Gilbert et al., 2014), MMOs have these elements plus a number of other unique factors that enable the self to be more fully realised.

First, research showed that avatars act to embody the player in games, and provide a means to 'exist' within MMOs (Whalen et al., 2003). They act as the focal point for the delivery of, and attendance of a presentation of self and make it clear when the frame of reference (Goffman, 1974) is occurring, with new armour and titles easily identified (Tronstad, 2008). They also enable identification of character

progression, and provide coherence for the version of self that is being presented, both for the actor and the audience (Yee et al., 2009). Second, social structures are built into game mechanics (such as Guilds and Raid groups), and enable organised social interaction, so providing an audience for presenting a version of self. Third, more than most virtual spaces, MMOs allow the player to create a version of self which is not part of the game structure. An example would be creating a character which solely trades on the in-game Auction house.

Fourth, MMOs have instant feedback through real time interaction, in comparison to a forum or SNS which typically have asynchronous feedback. Fifth, most virtual spaces are characterised by interaction through words and, to a lesser degree, video or sound. MMOs has text-based interaction, but is characterised by visual actions, which carry more weight due to emphasising the choices made. Sixth, MMOs contain many pre-existing categories, all of which can activate Role cues, thereby triggering Role schemas which can both interact with pre-existing self schemas, or create new ones.

Seventh, players are not bound either by reality (or social norms of what can be presented on websites), nor by the expectation of being close to reality if players were to meet up in real life. By comparison, the presentation of self on dating websites is limited by the anticipated meeting of the other person. Eighth, the Lore existing within MMO actively encourages people to think about their characters; in contrast, SNS are typified by the automated replication of the offline self. Ninth, MMOs can be goal oriented (competitive or co-operative), casual (collecting, socialising), or as social as required. Finally, ninth, unless the player desires, there are no links are required to real life, so ensuring complete anonymity in the game environment.

Through these unique affordances, MMOs provide more opportunities for the presentation of self within an interactive media, with the player controlled avatar in an immersive environment (Lu, Shen, & Williams, 2014).

2.5 Research Questions

There has been research looking at the presentation of self within MMOs (e.g. Bessière et al., 2007; Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Gilbert et al., 2011; Gilbert et al., 2014), but little real engagement in *how* players create a new version of self. This is a central question to ask since it will allow for an understanding the structural elements motivating a certain

'performance.' As such, the first research question is – **How do gamers use MMOs to present concepts of self?**

Research has also looked at motivations for playing MMOs (e.g. Demetrovics et al., 2011; Fuster et al., 2012; Yee, 2006b), but again, has looked at a broad spectrum of motivations, rather than the nuances inherent in presenting alternate version of self. As with the first research question, whilst it is critical to know why players engage in these processes and what they wish to achieve by it. This is particularly important given the increasing presence of many people in virtual environments – whether they be on websites, blogs, twitter, social networking sites or MMOs. This alter existence in virtual environments is only set to continue and it is critical to understand how, and why, people present their version of self in these environments. As such, in an attempt to tease apart from motivations for engaging in presentation of self in MMOs, the second research question is – **if the gamer engages in creating a version of self, why do they do so?**

However, it can be acknowledged that despite the fact that some people use MMOs as a place to engage in creating alternative versions of self, research (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Yee, 2006b) indicates that it is not a common reason for playing MMOs. Given the potency of these environments for such experimentation and the evidence for its occurrence in MUDs, (Bartle, 1996; Turkle, 1995), it may be beneficial to examine why people do not engage in such activity, so the third research question is – **for those that do not engage in such activities, why do they not do so?**

Finally, research has examined the effects of MMO gameplay on the offline lives of players, and with the dearth of research into the presentation of self overall, there is very little looking at the impact of such manipulations on their offline lives. Given the ubiquity of virtual environments at present, the fourth research question is – **for those that do present a version of self in MMOs, what impact does it have on their daily offline lives?**

It is anticipated that answers to these four research questions will produced a coherent, accurate and rational account of the presentation of self in MMOs, and in so doing will make an original contribution to the literature.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, the literature relating to the online presentation of self has been introduced, with research indicating that across a number of different virtual spaces, people will create versions of self (Back et al., 2010; Gilbert et al., 2014; Vazire & Gosling, 2004). The avatar in particular has been highlighted as critical for players when presenting a version of self within the game (Schroeder, 2002; Vasalou et al., 2009). However, as a product of the different affordances that each space allows, there are some restrictions in what can be successfully claimed (Stefanone et al., 2008). In this regard, MMOs are potentially the freest type of virtual space with a series of features that enable the creative presentation of self with, as a default, no links to the offline world.

In the next chapter, the first study is introduced, where data accrued from the interviewing of a number of MMO players is analysed using Grounded Theory, with special care paid to address the research questions, but also with affordances, and the self as Structure / self as Process model in mind.

Chapter Three: Study One

3.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter looks at the first study of the thesis, a qualitative study of twenty nine online interviews analysed using Grounded theory. In the first section the methodological aspects of the study are considered, followed by an analysis of the interview data. In the discussion, an overview of the study is presented, and reflections on the study examined.

3.1.1 Aim and Objectives

The aim of the study was to acquire qualitative data for the thesis, with the following objectives:

1. To examine the role of character creation in the presentation of self.
2. To discover how playing a character can enable versions of the self to be experienced.
3. To consider how game worlds and the real world overlap.
4. To examine the impact of such presentation of self on the players.

3.2 Research Methodology

This section presents a detailed account of the methodology used, addressing the details of grounded theory, and the rationale for choosing it. This is followed by details of the research procedure, including the sampling strategy, recruitment of participants, and ethical considerations. After having looked at process of data collection, the data analysis process is considered.

3.2.1 Overview of Grounded Theory

Origins of Grounded Theory

The roots of Grounded theory (GT) lie in symbolic interactionism, derived from the pragmatist ideas of Mead (1934) and Cooley (1902). Developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a counterpoint to the overtly quantitative methodologies that dominated the 1960's it was based on rigorous principles. It was also a rebuke to existing qualitative methodologies (e.g. content analysis) that Glaser and Strauss (1967) felt were based on *a priori* assumptions, rather than on real world data.

Nature of Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strauss (1967) developed a method where the data was dominant, with a participant-led analysis that created a model which was a natural fit for the situation from which it was drawn. It is an inductive method that develops a theoretical model which seeks to explain human behaviour for a given topic (Chenitz & Swanson, 1986). It has a number of unique features, as outlined below:

Theoretical Sampling

Since GT is guided by the emerging data, the acquisition of new participants is driven by the emergent concepts. Purposive sampling techniques are used to procure participants who could fill gaps in the conceptual model, or open up new areas of investigation (Charmaz, 2011). So, the theory should dictate the type of participant that should be interviewed next. Corbin and Strauss (2008) argued that theoretical sampling can also occur during the process of data analysis, whereby interesting areas of analysis are given prominence. During an interview itself, and between one interview and the next, the interview schedule can be altered so that viable themes are prioritised.

Constant Comparative Analysis

Glaser and Strauss (1967) emphasised the idea of Constant Comparison, where the researcher looks for similarities across the data set – looking at both commonalities, and dissimilarities that could prove theoretically useful (Heath & Cowley, 2004). Together with effective theoretical sampling, this makes GT a cyclical process, whereby data collection and analysis occur as a product of, and feedback into, each other.

Sometimes it is not possible to engage in both theoretical sampling and constant comparison at the same time (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), such as when archival data is used. In such cases theoretical sampling entails following those concepts that are achieving greater prominence (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Theoretical Saturation

During this iterative process, at a critical point no new conceptual insights emerge from the data – theoretical saturation is said to have occurred. Charmaz (2011) warned that repetition of concepts was not to be confused with theoretical saturation, since repetition can occur without all available insights having been identified. For Bloor and Wood (2006) theoretical saturation occurred when the acquisition of new data did not develop core concepts of the model, but only periphery concepts.

Coding of Data

Open coding is the first stage of analysis, and is characterised by line-by-line analysis of data to generate initial concepts in the analysis process; the theoretical model could also start to be considered, albeit in a speculative form. Preliminary conceptual links could be made between concepts and finally, there should be continual comparison of the emerging concepts as to their likeness or dissimilarity to existing concepts.

During axial coding the theoretical model would be further developed, where ideas concerning structure and process are developed (1998), and the relationships between concepts established. The process can be facilitated by graphical techniques in order to clarify the data which, together with memoing, enable visualising the model in a holistic sense.

Selective coding is dominated by two elements, the choosing of a Core Category (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and the integration of the existing categories and relationships into a theoretical model. Poorly developed concepts may also be fleshed out, and concepts lacking sufficient evidence discarded. The theoretical model is developed so it represents an abstracted version of the raw data that it should be able to explain most cases, although it may not be capable of explaining every aspect of every case (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Allan (2003) has argued that the micro-analysis of Strauss and Corbin (1998) can result in two problems – it is extremely time intensive, and the researcher can become overwhelmed by the amount of data obtained. Glaser (1992) agreed, saying that this can lead to over-conceptualisation. Notwithstanding these criticisms, this thesis used the Strauss and Corbin (1998) approach.

Memoing

A unique feature of GT is the use of memos, which act as analytic 'aide memoires', with Strauss and Corbin (1998) recommending the use of memos and visual aids as a way to conceptualise the data. Typically the type of memo will change during the data analysis process, with earlier memos being descriptive and relating to the raw data, whilst later memos tend to be abstract in nature, tying together concepts and categories. They act as a means of detailing the inner dialogue of the researcher, providing an avenue for ideas to emerge about concepts, the theoretical model, and on hypothetical links within the model

Theoretical Model Development

GT was designed to produce either substantive or formal theories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), where substantive theories are developed for specific areas of inquiry, whilst formal theories consider a group of related areas. However, McCann and Clark (2003) noted that GT typically produced substantive theories due to its emphasis on the actions, processes, and experiences of the research participants. A substantive theory can be converted into a formal one, the simplest method being to apply the substantive theory to other areas and examine the fit.

Versions of Grounded Theory

Glaser and Strauss (1967) published *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in which they outlined the methodology of GT, with the core ideas of theory emerging from the data, and the researcher having no theoretical framework in mind when starting the analysis (Cutcliffe, 2000). However, in the early 1990's Glaser and Strauss disagreed on two central points. The first problem related to theoretical sensitivity, asking how could a researcher let the theory emerge unhindered whilst also having an awareness of existing literature (so as to avoid replicating existing work)? Glaser (1992) argued that the researcher should not read any relevant literature prior to data collection and analysis, since it might constrain theoretical insights. He also provided seventeen "coding families" containing lists of terms that could be used to help coding. However, as Kelle (2005) noted, Glaser (1992) provided little information on how the families could be used in practice. In contrast, Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that some prior knowledge on a topic was inevitable, but that with due diligence, such knowledge could both inform and be accounted for in the analysis. Indeed, Baker, Wuest, and Stern (1992) have argued that with awareness comes the opportunity to use pre-existing knowledge to better understand the situation in hand, and to help in establishing rapport with participants (Rabionet, 2011).

The second problem was that Glaser (1992) argued that Strauss and Corbin's (1990b) technique of 'Axial Coding' would 'force the data' into pre-existing categories, so limiting the power of the GT method. Glaser (1992) argued that whilst Glasserian GT allowed the theory to 'emerge' naturally from the data, using pre-existing concepts would 'force' the data into a certain pattern, so creating an artificial construct.

There was been no resolution of these issues, resulting in a split between Glasserian and Straussian GT. A further development occurred when Charmaz (2011) developed a Constructivist approach to GT, which emphasised the shared understanding of the event in question being created between the participants and researcher. This approach has been dismissed by Glaser (2012) as being generic qualitative data analysis. He argued that GT is led by the data provided by the participant and that in allowing the interpretations of the researcher to intervene in the analysis, a false interpretation has been created. Indeed, constructivist GT is, from an epistemological perspective, similar to IPA.

This thesis adopted the GT approach developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990a), with the literature on the self in MMOs not being examined before data collection, so allowing the model to emerge from the data. However, the author, being a gamer, had expert knowledge of the area that indirectly informed the model developed. As indicated however, this is accepted within the Straussian (1990a) paradigm. Finally, the Straussian (1990a) approach has been identified as suitable for less experienced researchers due to its structured method, with Kelle (2005) arguing that whilst Glaser's use of theoretical codes is more flexible and powerful, it is harder for a less experienced theorist.

Rationale for Choosing Grounded Theory

A number of methodologies could have been chosen for analysing the data from study one, but the guiding principle for the choice was it being appropriate for the data in hand. Thematic analysis has an inherent flexibility, free from any epistemological assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006) but works best when there are some theoretical constructs already existing in the area, to guide the analysis. Similarly, narrative analysis was rejected on the grounds that whilst the presentation of self in MMOs is part of a life story, it is not obligatory and narrative analysis might be found wanting. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was a viable option, with its emphasis on life events and interpretation of experiences. Given the potential importance of the presentation of self in MMOs this might have been practicable, but as with the Narrative analysis, not all participants use MMOs to present the self. So IPA was rejected as the method of analysis since its epistemological assumptions would not have necessarily applied to all participants. Finally, conversation and discourse analysis were not used, since the elements of conversational interaction were not part of the research questions.

Having considered all of these options, two methods were used to create the theoretical model – GT, as indicated and, to a lesser degree, virtual ethnography. GT was chosen for two reasons: first, there has been little research into the presentation of self in MMOs and, as Morse (2001) established, GT is most effective when exploring topics not previously examined. Second, rooted in symbolic interactionism, it is appropriate to be used in work looking at symbolic manipulation of concepts of self in MMOs.

Given the sample size of the study, one criticism of GT might be the risk of the results not generalising. This was compounded by a purposive expert strategy that reduced its scope even further (Gobo, 2007). However, GT does not intend to create theories that are easily generalised, or necessarily to produce formal theories (McCann & Clark, 2003). Typically, GT is applied to a specific area with the intention of creating a substantive theory. Furthermore, qualitative research (across different methodologies) does not concern itself with creating generalizable theory (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Another potential criticism could be that the original formulation of GT argued for theory emerging from the data, an argument that substantially negates the impact of the researcher. However, it is arguable whether Glaser (Glaser, 1992) would have taken issue with this.

To a lesser degree the study, and thesis as a whole, has been informed by a virtual ethnography approach, with has previous research into MMOs (Kolo & Baur, 2004; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). As with research by Chee, Vieta, and Smith (2006) and Isabella (2007), the primary author spent extensive periods in MMOs engaging with the games as a player, not as a researcher. This was integral to the success of the study since it allowed for the development of social networks, for the creation of avatars to play with, and for the immersion within the games and game culture. Taken with the GT dictum that 'all is data' (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the time spent in-game acted as a 'pseudo-ethnography' that informed the GT analysis.

3.2.2 Research Procedure

To ensure transparency of the research, this section details procedures for the study, including the sampling strategy, recruitment of participants, and efforts made to ensure participants anonymity.

Sampling Strategy

Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that before recruitment it is necessary to establish who will be recruited, where from, the type of data that will be collected, and how it will be collected. Given the intention to create a substantive theoretical model, an expert purposive sampling strategy was chosen to recruit participants for the study –

with the choice of substantive theory being based on three reasons. First, MMOs are interesting virtual spaces in their own right (e.g. Use of Avatars, etc.). Second, given the differences between MMOs and other virtual spaces, trying to draw comparisons might be spurious, due to the differences in those spaces. Third, given the qualitative methodology used, there was no need for points of comparison, on the understanding that the theory was only to be applied to those areas for which it was created. This expert sampling strategy sought a particular target group for participation, on the premise that only that group would be able to provide the information required (Trochim, 2006). Typically, in GT sampling and analysis occurs simultaneously until theoretical saturation has occurred (Miles & Huberman, 1994), but in the thesis data collection was ahead of the analysis. As indicated earlier however, theoretical saturation can occur even with archival data, since the researcher follows all paths until no new material is revealed.

Recruiting Participants

Initially, the author's contacts in the game WoW were drawn upon. A post was placed on the Guild forum, which resulted in 12 participants volunteering. In addition, an additional 17 participants were obtained through game forums (detailed in appendix III). In all instances, initial forum messages provided information about the study, contact details, plus reassurances that the study had been passed by the ethical board of Nottingham Trent University (NTU), and finally a request for participants. It was important to ensure that no minors were admitted into the study, so it was clarified that potential participants had to be over 18 years old.

At this stage no further information was provided, as it was thought that providing excessive information might overwhelm potential participants and potentially bias the data. For posts placed on public domain game forums, the forum admin was contacted prior to placing the post, asking permission to do so. In all cases where the admin replied, permission was given; where the admin did not reply, no post was placed.

In total, 29 participants were recruited for the first study. There were 13 female participants (45%) and 16 male participants (55%), with an age range of 19 to 53. There

were 18 synchronous messenger-based interviews (62%), and 11 asynchronous email-based ones (38%).

Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent

It was important that the study followed appropriate ethical principles, as laid out by the British Psychological Society (BPS) and guidelines of NTU. In accordance with this, a participant information sheet, informed consent form, and debrief sheet were developed. The participant information sheet provided information about the study, what would be required of them, how to withdraw their data if they so wished, how the data would be stored, who would have access to it, that the conversation would be recorded, and finally that their data would be anonymous, but not confidential. As Bassett and O'Riordan (2002) wrote, the issue of anonymity is particularly important and as such, pseudonyms were used for all participants.

Having been informed of the purpose of the study, the consent form recorded the participants' willingness to take part and finally, the debrief form recapped the purpose of the study and why it had been completed, and provided contact information for the researcher, should the participant wish to discuss anything further. In addition, the contact details of the thesis supervisor were provided, plus a contact number for a suitable support line if this was required. In all cases, these documents were emailed to the participant at the appropriate times, so that they could provide fully informed consent, and were appropriately supported after the research had ended.

The data from the study was stored on a password protected computer, which was only accessible to the researcher; the data itself could only be viewed by the researcher and supervisory team. If a participant wished to withdraw their data, they only had to provide their chosen identifier and all data would have been removed from the study. Up to the date of writing, no participants have asked for their data to be removed from the first study.

Since both synchronous and asynchronous interview techniques were used, separate ethics procedures were required. For synchronous interviews it was necessary to type out the participant information at the start of each interview, with the participant required to type 'Yes' or 'No' to each question. Having addressed this

information, each participant was asked specifically whether they wished to take part – a question they were required to answer.

Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder (2008) argued that in practice gaining absolutely fully informed consent can be complicated, and that with online ethics the researcher needs to be sensitive to the context of the work. Sin (2005) agreed, proposing that a more reflexive approach to informed consent was required, particularly in the context of interviews where consent must be maintained throughout. In the interviews of study one, care was taken to stay aware of the state of mind of the participant, checking that there were no signs of discomfort or irritation with the questioning, as indicated by long pauses in replying or avoidance of the question.

Kraut et al. (2003) argued that one mean of attempting to ensure only adult participants such as asking for credit card information, though they warn that such checks might increase drop-out rates; however, such checks are marred by the fact that there are few means of verifying the truth of the information provided. As Pittenger (2003) argued, it may be that verifying identity only becomes an issue when controversial topics are being discussed or the study has higher than average risks for the participants.

For the asynchronous interviews, the participant information sheet and informed consent form were emailed to the participant. Having read both sheets, the participant was required to reply to a series of questions embedded within the email confirming that they understood the study and consented to take part, and then return the document by email.

3.2.3 Data Collection

This section provides information on the method of data collection, the development of the interview schedule, and details concerning the interview process.

Method of Data Collection

A number of different methodologies have been used in collecting data – such as psychometric designs when looking at personality characteristics (Bessière et al., 2007),

and qualitative for social networking (as identified by Warmelink & Siitonen, 2011). For this study online semi-structured interviews, and email interviews, were chosen as the method of data collection.

Semi-structured interviews are commonly used in qualitative research (Howitt & Cramer, 2008), but Darlington and Scott (Darlington & Scott, 2003) warned that interviews can reveal 'what' occurs, but sometimes the 'how' is unexplored, with critical information being left undefined. However, they reported that there are benefits, since they provide a flexible means of acquiring data, with the space to examine the thoughts and feelings of the participants.

Opdenakker (2006) argued that online interviews have many advantages in comparison to offline Face-to-Face (FtF) interviews, in accessing participants who may be geographically widespread, or unable to attend face-to-face meetings. He acknowledged there are reduced 'traditional' social cues due to the lack of physicality but argued this can be overcome through the use of emoticons. Another advantage of online interviews is the reduced time and cost of conducting them (Davis, Bolding, Hart, Sherr, & Elford, 2004), though Kazmer and Xie (2008) argued that it can still take substantial amounts of effort to turn online data into useful material, through having to anonymise and clean the data. Kazmer and Xie (2008) acknowledged that even with these practices to engage with, the process would be faster than conducting face-to-face interviews given the costs of transcription.

A feature of online interviews that can cause concern is that there can be conversational disorder (Opdenakker, 2006), where participants and researcher 'talk' over each other, resulting in a disordered conversation with multiple simultaneous threads. This might reduce the flow in the conversation (Murray & Sixsmith, 2002), though Dickey, Burnett, Chudoba and Kazmer (2007) maintained that those with faster typing skills would be able to overcome these disadvantages. Reassuringly, Stieger and Goritz (2006) found the quality of data from chat programmes to be acceptable, and so it was not a concern for the thesis. Not-withstanding such issues though, synchronous interviews were chosen as one of the means of collecting data for study one, due to its appropriate nature for GT research (Charmaz, 2011), and the benefits in exploring the thoughts and feelings of the participants (Darlington & Scott, 2003)

In addition, a number of asynchronous interviews were also completed. There a number of benefits to asynchronous communication, including negating issues relating

to different time zones, enabling slow typists or those with English as a second language to take part, and in generating more detailed answers than might be acquired in a synchronous environment (Fox, Morris, & Rumsey, 2007). Given these benefits, the decision was made to include synchronous and synchronous interviews in the study, so that the benefits of both systems might be accrued.

Development of the Interview Schedule

Following GT principles, no previous literature was examined before creating the interview schedule, but instead a small pilot study was developed to help inform the creation of the schedule. The questions for the pilot study were very general in character, so as not to unduly influence the results, but were related to the research questions of the thesis. The pilot study was conducted on four MMO players, and produced four main themes, which were presented at the iiWAS Conference 2008 (Meredith, Griffiths, & Whitty, 2008) – psychological masking, reference to real life attitudes, gaming as a means of identity exploration, and concepts of emotional investment. A full write up of the pilot study can be found in appendix IV.

There are several commonalities between the pilot study results and the interview schedule – the concepts of identity exploration, emotional investment and referencing real life attitudes. The initial theme of Psychological Masking is also referenced in the interview schedule though not in its original form – it was merged with the concept of identity exploration.

In the interview schedule for study one, after initial ethical issues had been dealt with (i.e. participant information & informed consent), there were a number of demographic questions which established the sex, age, location of the participant, amongst other variables. Following the advice of Strauss and Corbin (1990b) there were a series of broad questions, which then narrowed down to more specific ones, with questions grouped in thematic categories. The full interview schedule can be found in appendix V.

As part of the process of reflexivity, and following good GT practice (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the interview schedule was changed as appropriate after each interview. From a GT perspective, this was a variant on theoretical sampling, whereby productive topics were followed more extensively, so developing emerging concepts (Knight,

Nunkoosing, Vrij, & Cherryman, 2003). This was also done when it was apparent that the wording of a particular phrase or question was not being understood properly by the majority of participants, or failing to generate any useful data.

Formal Interview Process

The interview process for the email interviews was significantly easier than for the synchronous ones – once a potential participant had expressed interest, an email was sent to them with a copy of the Participant Information sheet. They were requested to read the entire information sheet and, should they agree to take part, sign the declaration and return the document. The participant information sheet included the following information / requests - whether the participant understood what was required of them, if they were over 18, if they understood that their work would be anonymous but not confidential, that they could withdraw their data if they so wished, that participation was voluntary, by what name they would wish to be referred to, and that having answered all of those questions, that they wished to take part.

Once this had been received by the researcher, a second email was sent to the participant, with a Word document with all of the questions in it. It was necessary to re-contact four participants to clarify their answers or to ask follow up questions.

For synchronous (Chat programme) interviews, a similar process occurred but in real time. Once a potential participant had replied to a post in a forum, contact was established with details about the study, confirmed that they were over 18, and asked if they would like to take part. If the respondent said they did, then contact details and an appropriate time to meet online were arranged. For the synchronous interviews, two chat programmes were used – MSN Messenger and Skype – although Slype supported video calling, this feature was not used in the interviews, to ensure a greater degree of parity between the synchronous interviews.

For both groups, after completion of the interview, an email was sent thanking them for their participation in the research, together with the debriefing form and a reminder concerning the withdrawal of data, and regarding anonymity.

3.2.4 Process of Data Analysis

This section outlines the process of data analysis, characterised by the abstraction of raw data with constant comparison across concepts to provide methodological reliability (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The analysis followed Straussian precepts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990a) with the central tenets of Grounded theory being adhered to.

Open coding was completed in detail, given its importance in the analysis, with line-by-line coding of the interview transcripts, and generation of initial concepts as each transcript was analysed. Throughout this process, constant comparison was implemented through repeatedly checking the emerging codes against existing codes, to assess for potential commonalities. This occurred both within and between participant transcripts, so producing a more rigorous analysis. In addition, memos were written as appropriate so that thoughts and ideas about the data could be recorded.

During the stage of axial coding the theoretical model was developed further, together with the continued abstraction of certain conceptual categories as appropriate. The relationships between existing concepts were assessed, to see how they influenced each other within the emerging model. At this point, initial sub-concepts were developed through the application of constant comparison, so resulting in the creation of a more ordered structure. This process was facilitated by graphical techniques in order to make more sense of the data which, together with continued memoing, enabled visualising the model in a more holistic sense.

At the stage of selective coding, the core category under which all other categories and concepts could be associated was established, and the sub-elements more fully fleshed out with respect to the relationships between model elements. The existing sub-structure was also pruned as necessary, and convergent concepts merged together. It should be noted however that grounded theory analysis is cyclic in nature, with coding, abstraction, and development occurring in an iterative manner. As such, whilst the details of the coding process are presented sequentially, during analysis were elements were enacted in a more flexible manner.

At this stage validation of the theory also occurred, a process that can occur through one of two means – by returning to the raw data to test the 'fit' of the theory, or by presenting the theory to participants to determine how well it fits their cases.

However, in some cases participants will not recognise their own 'place' within a model, since it has been reduced into an abstract model (Glaser, 1992). For this reason, the raw data was re-examined, to confirm the validity of the theory, and rechecked all concepts, and categories. As an additional check on the data analysis, a colleague (Dr.J.Fila) looked over 3 interviews (approximately 10% of the first study data) and completed a blind thematic analysis upon the themes within those transcripts to see if similar themes were identified. The results supported the concepts created from the GT analysis, with Dr.Fila's comments appearing in appendix VI. In addition, an example of the GT analysis can be found in appendix VII, with the transcript, codes, and memos relating to one of the participants.

3.3 Qualitative Findings

This section reports the findings of the GT analysis, with one core category and four main concepts being discussed, with the analysis starting with the core category – Elements of Self. The next concept, Emotionality (Character Aesthetics), references the emotional connections people have to their characters as a means of presenting the self, before Social interaction is discussed as a factor for the presentation of self in MMOs. This leads into a discussion as to the Motivations to play MMOs, before finally the Nature of MMOs is considered.

All quotes are verbatim, and all grammar and spelling mistakes therein were in the original texts. All player and character names have been replaced with pseudonyms, and identifying information removed. Gaming terms in the quotes are explained in appendix II.

3.3.1 Elements of Self

The presentation of self is played out against the context of the individual's offline lives, but the single most powerful factor in this presentation of self is the offline self – it determines how the individual acts within the game world, and the processes behind those actions. For some players, MMOs are a place to recreate existing elements of self, but without any attempt to 'enhance' or idealise their avatar, as this extract from Alexa's interview illustrates:

> *Alexa: One gets played more than others, so it becomes my main character. In World of Warcraft it was Alexa and in my mind I gave her my own personality…Alexa was the most important, because she was guild master and my representative in the game. Alexa was the character I identified with the most, since she was my first alliance character…my warrior gnome was a kid, so she would probably represent my child within…my other chars had different personalities to some extent, but Alexa had my own personality.*

From this example it can be seen that Alexa has imbued her characters with some element of 'herself'; the character seems to be particularly potent and touches upon several concepts – presentation of self, social status within the game, the first important character. Indeed, the somewhat confusing replication of Alexa (the player) and Alexa (the character) gives some idea of the extent to which the player has adopted the character as their means of self-presentation in general virtual environments. However, this is reminiscent of Goffman's (1961) concept of the 'role', where 'Alexa the player' is stepping into the role of 'the character', a character which has its own limitations and responsibilities which exist only in the game world. In this case there is very little difference between the online and offline versions of self in terms of self-presentation – a finding similar to that of Aas et al. (2010) who found that SL avatars tended to replicate the offline self. However, Alexa also talks of her gnome warrior as being 'the child within', a phrase that does not fit well with either self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987) or possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986). However, Markus's (1977) earlier work on self-schema might be able to shed light on this concept of self, with Alexa's gnome avatar being representative of an earlier self-schema.

The idea of players replicating their offline self is found in the literature as well, with a number of virtual spaces being researched, including websites (Weibel et al., 2010), blogs (Herring et al., 2004), SNS (Ellison et al., 2007), SL (Linares et al., 2011), and MUDs (Turkle, 1995). The following extract confirms a similar pattern in MMOs:

> **Lauren**: *its so difficult to get people to be healers and that comes naturally to me it seems :)*
>
> **Researcher**: *why's that do you think?*
>
> **Lauren**: *I guess its because deep down I am pretty caring and spend a lot of time listening to and helping friends with problems…in game and in rl*

In this case, Lauren is not replicating herself per se, but is drawing from her perspective of life, so is evoking the caring side of her self (Back et al., 2010). This appears to be an almost instinctive on her part, indicating that for some players the presentation of self is guided sub-consciously by pre-existing schemas (Pillemer, 1992) and a passive representation of the phenomenal self (Jones & Gerard, 1967). Indeed, the work of O'Brien (1999) seems pertinent here, in her assertion that generally people are limited by their own corporeal experience, and so replicate what they know. This idea of the offline self being 'overpowering' is also shown in the following extract from Herbert's interview:

> **Herbert**: *I tried to play my warlock as a true evil character who would never say thanks for anything, who would kill any weak characters that got in her way etc, but I failed miserably. I felt horrible about not thanking people if they helped me and I tried to gank an alliance player who happened to be PvP enabled, but when she got low on health I let her get away, and then she ran into some mobs who were about to kill her so I saved her life by pulling them off her ☺*

In this scenario Herbert, despite wanting to play an 'evil' character using intimidation (Jones & Pittman, 1982), was unable to step into the role and felt guilty for not saying thank you, even going so far as to help an enemy player. In effect, Herbert's offline self-concept was so strong as to disallow the possibility of creating the desired version of self. In an attempt to conceal his true traits (Chester, 2004b), Herbert had managed to create an undesired version of self (Ogilvie, 1987) and his code of moral social conduct had been violated to an unsustainable degree. This is all the more interesting given that in MMOs players are effectively immortal, and can resurrect easily at set waypoints, so making their death relatively painless and adverse effects on enemy players transitory.

So, as shown in the extracts of Alexa, Lauren, and Herbert, some players will replicate their existing self-concept within a game character. The extent of this replication can change with time, potentially indicating that it is not a stable construct, as the extract from Nicole's interview shows:

> **Interviewer:** *what about identity stuff then? in the beginning did you make more of an effort to create a unique toon identity, in comparison to now?*
>
> **Nicole:** *the first toon i ever made was a night elf, cuz they were tall, slim pretty unique… but since then i like dwarves, they remind me more of me…short and stout with a lil bit of 'tude.*
>
> **Interviewer:** *heh, so as time has gone by would you say that you're less bothered about creating a new 'identity' as it were, but playing yourself is ok*
>
> **Nicole:** *exactly!*

In this situation, Nicole starts by using Night elf characters but the way she wishes to represent herself, in aesthetic form at least, changes to something that she is more familiar with – i.e. herself. So, engagement with the presentation of self can change over time, normally in the direction of presenting a version of self which is truer to the offline version. Nicole attempted to engage in active presentation of a different version of self, but her offline real self (Rogers, 1951) has proved too strong and re-asserted itself (O'Brien, 1999; Waggoner, 2009), so supporting previous research indicating people that find it easier to express the true self online (McKenna, 2007).

There is also evidence that whilst players can replicate themselves online, that this process and changes thereof are not hidden from the player, but in many respects can inform how they play their avatars, as the following extract from Vernon's interview illustrates:

> **Interviewer:** *Do you feel that your characters represent you, or part of you, in any way?*
>
> **Vernon:** *Yes I think they do. Its hard to say if a character has any existence of its own even if one was to consider it say an actor in something like spontaneous acting or theatre. Characters tend to be stereotypies or simplifications of certain aspects of our*

selves....different characters might represent different stereotypes of personal attitudes. This can lend to them an aura of idealization, because they tend to lack the complexity associated with the person behind the monitor. They represent a part of me, are part of my act, but not in any sense more real or unreal than person guiding the virtual puppet.

Vernon eloquently puts forward the proposition that his characters do represent him, but in a way which is very different than that of Alexa, Lauren, or Nicole. For him, characters are deconstructed elements of the offline self, providing the bare bones of that self – enough to create the illusion of a living visage, but in fact lacking any of '*the complexity associated with the person behind the monitor*'. For Vernon, his character can represent his offline self and indeed, as his final sentence illustrates, can carry equal weighting to the offline self, but still somehow lacking. In effect, Vernon is much more aware of the transient nature of the presentation of self through his avatars, where, as Jones and Gerrard (1967) argued, his phenomenal self is shifting in and out of activity. As Vernon indicated, characters can allow for the creation of idealised versions (Bessière et al., 2007; Ducheneaut et al., 2009) of aspects of self-schemas present within the player's autobiographical memory (Conway, 2005; Pillemer, 1992).

For other players, MMOs do allow the opportunity to present a different version of self, drawing upon the fantastic elements to create an 'alter ego'. In this respect, MMOs can deviate from the norm of virtual environments as being a place to represent the true self:

> **Researcher**: *ok....so, when you create a character, how much do you imbue it with some part of yourself?*
>
> **Ivan**: *I dont think a character is ever "all me" but they tend to contain exaggerated aspects of my personality depending on things like gender and class.*
>
> **Researcher**: *ah huh, can you expand on tha ta bit?*
>
> **Ivan**: *Well, Alia is a female warlock. I picked female because I thought if any gender is going to become a vengeful demon worshipping sadist, its going to be a woman. And warlocks are supposed to be power hungry, so Alia is terribly self-absorbed and thinks she is the best thing ever. I am self absorbed, snobby and elitist in IRL, but not to the same extent.*

It is clear that that Ivan is drawing from several sources in this extract, with the predominant one being his strong emotions towards women that, albeit said in a playful manner, are reflective of his general thoughts. It is the combination of these presumptions, drawn from his schemas concerning both females and warlocks, which enable him to see the character as providing a suitable vehicle for enacting the enhanced version of his self, as found by Chester (Chester, 2004a). In the following extract Pete emphatically identifies with the Paladin class in World of Warcraft:

> **Researcher**: *Do you have particular positive or negative thoughts about a certain class type, as a means of representing yourself?*
>
> **Pete**: *I am a Paladin. A holy warrior of the light. I just think that sounds bad ass…yet honourable. I like that. I can recognize with that. Don't like rogues much…too cheap...*

In the excerpt he gives a very strong indication of how he wants to be seen within the game – '*a holy warrior of the light*'. It is suggested that Klimmt et al.'s (2010) concept of 'experiential merger' might be useful here, where the player replaces their offline concept of self with that of the character, so taking on its attributes. Pete does not say that he plays a paladin; he actively identified himself with the role by saying '*I am a Paladin*'. In terms of presenting a version of self, Pete has entirely inhabited the role of the Paladin (Goffman, 1961), identifying fully with the qualities that he sees the class as having.

He also indicated classes he doesn't wish to be associated with (e.g. rogues), since they are 'too cheap'. This is as powerful a statement as that with respect to paladin, for he does not dissociate himself from the rogue class due to game play mechanics or lack of interest. He dissociates himself in a much more emotional sense, of the rogue as being below him. The work of Ogilvie (1987) is relevant here, with the class of the rogue as being 'Not-Pete' – there is a very specific awareness that the rogue is something he does not wish to associate himself with. Interestingly therefore, with respect to the intention that players can show concerning the presentation of self, that can be as much intention *not* to be associated with a version of self, as there can to be associated with a desired version.

Similarly, Robert talked of being '*more social in WoW than in RL*' – so supporting the idea of virtual spaces being characterised by some exaggeration of traits (Chester, 2004b). On the surface, it might seem to disagree with research that indicated people tend to create honest versions of their offline self (e.g. Back et al., 2010; Bargh et al., 2002; Lampe et al., 2008) but it must be remembered that the virtual environment contains many different spaces, with each space allowing for different affordances (Kim et al., 2011; Miller, 2007). This point is mirrored in the following extract by Grace, who remarked that she liked the Night Elf race because they can turn invisible, and '*there is a lot of times in my rl I would like to disappear ☺*'. For Grace, who suffered from social phobia in real life, the game enabled her to play out a more social version of her self, but with the option of hiding both literally in the game, and figuratively behind the anonymity of the game when confronted by a situation she did not like. As a consequence of this faculty, the MMO enabled her to portray both ideal and actual versions of self. For both Robert and Grace, the anonymity afforded by MMOs is working in their favour, as previous research has indicated (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Suler, 2002). This is supplemented by the fact that there is no risk of contradictory offline information contaminating the version of self being presented, as can happen in SNS, due to most relationships also existing offline (Besmer & Lipford, 2010; Ramirez Jr & Walther, 2009; Wilson et al., 2012). This can also be seen in the following quote by Lauren:

> **Lauren**: *there is a lot more freedom with online …I can say things I wouldnt be game to face to face … maybe they are things I would have said when I was young ... im very flirtatious - thats fine online … buyt in RL id be a silly old fart :P*

For Lauren, who talked of living in a 'very conservative smallish community', the context of her gaming clearly plays an important part in understanding her gaming. Whereas in the previous example she was making a comparison based on location, in this extract there are temporal comparisons as well. As Wilson and Ross (Wilson & Ross, 2000; 2001) argued, people will sometimes make comparisons between their current and past versions of self, with the former generally being seen in a more positive light (see also Strahan & Wilson, 2006). In this situation Lauren playfully denigrates her current offline self, in contrast to the online version of self that is closer to an older version of her offline self. In effect, the self function of the autobiographical memory (Pillemer, 1992) is crossing across both temporal and locale plains, and so allowing for a

sense of continuity for the self (Bluck & Alea, 2002). It is clear that the MMO space allowed Lauren to (re)create a new version of self, albeit one that previously existed in the past, that is arguably closer to an ideal version of self (Higgins, 1987). This concurs with previous research that has found idealised versions of self being played out through MMO characters (Bessière et al., 2007; Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Schau & Gilly, 2003; Yee, 2006b).

It is also clear that Lauren engages in a process of filtering information concerning the version of self produced, a practice already noted on SNS (Chen & Marcus, 2012; Schlenker & Pontari, 2000; Utz, 2010). However, in Lauren's case, the audience 'split' is between the online and offline elements of her life, making Goffman's (Goffman, 1959) front / back region analogy highly applicable. When offline, Lauren felt unable to say what she wanted and as such, presented a restricted version of self; when online however, she was able to play out an unrestricted self, arguably due to the anonymity that the situation affords (Suler, 2004). What is unclear is whether Lauren wished to bring the online self into the offline world, so making the online version a possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986), or was content to allow it to remain purely online.

Character Creation

The act of creating a character is a seminal point in gaming, since the character is the gateway for the presentation of self in the game, although not all players will try out different versions of self (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). The following quote by Frank illustrates the importance of character creation to some players:

> **Interviewer**: *when you create a character, do you imbue it with some part of yourself?*
> **Frank**: *a little bit, yes*
> **Interviewer**: *...how so?*
> **Frank**: *for example when i created 'Hugo', a shaman, i found its shamanistic background interesting, considering my interest in spiritual things and religions*
> **Interviewer**: *so, are parts of your personality in 'Hugo'?*
> **Frank**: *yes…the caring and spiritual aspects of my personality at least*

In this excerpt, Frank illustrates that character creation is an opportunity to engage in the construction of a new version of self, by imbuing a character with desired attributes – a process that can take substantial periods of time (Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009). For Frank, the perception of a 'shaman' is linked to specific elements of his offline self, indicating both a pre-existing set of schemas about the concepts of shamans and caring (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000), but also a relative level of importance of schemas within his cognitions (Thomas et al., 2013). However, it is unclear whether this version of self is more easily represented than in the offline world, as Turkle (1995) might argue, but there is certainly some filtering of information occurring (Utz, 2010) so as to present the desired image.

For some players, the First Character is particularly (Wang et al., 2009). The following excerpt from the interview with Lauren illustrates the potential importance of first characters:

Lauren: well for my first toon I wanted to be as much like my DnD Cleric as I could as I thought I would be rping so I chose a druid. Family was alliance so Nelf it was. I took a lot of time to choose how she looked.. not too alien but I wanted her to reflect the nature of her home as well

Interviewer: how did you go about this process then, of reflecting her home?

Lauren: I put a lot of thought into profession before I began and chose herbalism and alchemy ad it seemd befitting a druid and then I chose a name to reflect both the profession and yet still have a sense of danger (because of the forms I could take) so I chose the name of a beautiful but deadly herb "Ami"

Interviewer: so why was it important to you that Ami...had so much attention put into her?

Lauren: I think it was because I wanted to be comfortable with the character I wanted to feel she reflected some of my values .. i have never been able to really rp someting alien to my nature

Interviewer: she reflects some of your values then?

Lauren: I value nature and the gifts of the earth, I have (until ill health) always had a garden and grown soem of my own food. I am interested in neatural healing and In Aussie terms "a bit of a greenie"

Interviewer: so…as your first character then it was important to you that she embodied that as well?

Lauren: absolutley

As can be seen from this extended extract, Lauren put substantial thought into her first character 'Ami'. Her reference to Dungeons and Dragons establishes a frame of reference (Goffman, 1974) for all interactions that subsequently occur, since her understanding of what a gaming character is has influenced the creation of relevant schema (Barclay, 1986). This application of Goffman's frame is played out over a substantially longer time frame than might be expected, but the concept still applies. In supporting evidence that suggests people can more easily create a true self online (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000), it is clear that Lauren wanted to create an emotionally resonant character, which she would feel comfortable playing. Her determination in aligning the class (druid), professions (herbalism and alchemy), and name ("Ami") with her offline values and practices indicates both the importance of the character, and the capacity to choose its physical appearance (Bryant & Akerman, 2009). It would appear she is also creating an ideal version of self (Higgins, 1987), drawn from a partially developed actual version of self. Again, this supports evidence suggesting that players tend to draw from what they know (Aas et al., 2010; Boudreau, 2013; Ducheneaut et al., 2009).

The value of first characters was indicated by other players with statements such as "he is my first character, so I guess I have developed a special bond to him" (Herbert); Audrey said of her first character that it was important because of "*doing things for the very first time…I get often a "flashback" from the time I was there with my first character…yes, I know what I felt that day.*" This reflects the importance of characters as a means of playing the game, where fantastic adventures can be experienced every day. Invigorated by such novel events, it is suggested that MMOs are capable of being more potent agents of change than SNS or SL because, as Hastie (1981) indicated, schema-incongruent information is given additional attention when encoding. It is not every day that one can wade into battle with a greatsword, reducing undead armies to dust! However, through MMOs, and as a product of the experiential merger that can occur (Klimmt et al., 2010), players are able to create new versions of self, with the associated autobiographical memories of those events (Belk, 2013).

Aside from first characters that, as shown, can have a special importance for players, there is evidence to suggest that players also use multiple characters to represent different elements of their self.

> **Interviewer**: *so, is there any part of you in these characters then?*
>
> **Maddie**: *oh yes…my trolls are my wild side…heh, they are crazy guys, sure know how to party…when I play trolls, they do what they want, say what they want, and just have a blast*
>
> **Interviewer**: *and that's part of you as well then irl?*
>
> **Maddie**: *my belfs are the shy aloof me.. and the ones I made to give my hubby some eye candy...yes…irl, my wild side is my tattoos and my outspokenness…irl, I am introverted... some days when I play, I do not feel overly social, and thats when the belfs see more play*

As with other players, the MMOs characters enable Maddie to play out aspects of her offline self, with her troll characters representing her wild side (represented in real life by her tattoos and outspokenness), whilst her Blood Elves (Belfs) represent the more introverted aspects of her character. In this example, these selves appear to be active in the offline world as well, making them actual versions of self (Higgins, 1987), but it is reasonable to expect that possible versions of self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) might be created in such a manner as well. It also confronts the idea that there is only one 'true' version of self, as proposed by Bargh et al. (2002). Researchers have argued that there as many version of self as there are social interactions (e.g. Gergen, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), so making the concept of multiple offline versions of self perfectly tenable. As posited by Ahuvia (2005) and Bahl and Milne (2010), there is evidence of 'multiphrenic' selves, suggesting the idea of multiple online selves mirroring their offline counterpart.

Aside from questions as to why she chose those particular races, the extract illustrates the impact that the offline context can have upon her online presentation of self. Her choice of character is dependent on her existing offline mood, indicating that it is the activation patterns of pre-existing schemas which have the greatest impact. This is also seen in the extract below from Greg's interview:

> **Interviewer:** *so, how much would you say that you actively put bits of your personality into a character then, or add bits which aren't you at all?*
>
> **Greg:** *Well. the choppa, black orc and magus represent three sides of me…the choppa, wild abandon and bloddy minded devotion to succeed against the odds. No matter the personal cost…the black orc, the need to shield others because if they are hurt I feel guilty (mums catholioc)…and the magus for the need to learn........everything, even if it might be considered strange, uninteresting, disgusting.*

For Greg, there is even more distinction between his elements of self, with three different classes being used to represent aspects of self. This is slightly different to Maddie however, in that Greg is using the pre-existing characteristics of the classes to provide the outline of his presentation of self – so indicating a merger between the player and the game (or more precisely the affordances provided by the game) to create an offline self (Klimmt et al., 2010). The Choppa, the Black Orc, and the Magus all have very different play styles, so creating pre-existing roles (Goffman, 1961) which Greg is able to step into.

Of course, the online presentation of self does not exist in isolation, but will have consequences on the internal representations of self that exist as self-schemas. Using a Goffmanian paradigm, the dramatic performance given will be accepted (or not) by the audience and this feedback fed into the internal version of self. However, one of the advantages of the online self as presented through MMOs is that it is not expected to correlate accurately with the offline self, as might be expected when using a SNS (Wilson et al., 2012). Moreover, given the anonymity that players have there is even less accountability to the offline self, with the risk of contradictory 'other generated' information being negated (Stefanone et al., 2008). Indeed, bearing this in mind, future research could fruitfully examine why more players do not create entirely new and fictitious versions of self for MMO environments.

Life Impact

In this section, evidence is presented which shows that presenting versions of self can have an impact on the offline lives of the players – beyond that of influencing

their (self)-schemas and autobiographical memories. The single biggest impact upon the lives of players is in the increased capacity of social interaction:

> ***Nicole:*** *… Simon* [her partner] *and I enjoy talking about what we've been up to* [in-game], *what we're doing etc.*
>
> ***Interviewer:*** *so it's something you share then*
>
> ***Nicole:*** *very very much so.*
>
> ***Interviewer:*** *so...would you say that MMOs have impacted upon your life then?*
>
> ***Nicole:*** *very much so, they take a bit of time, BUT they've enriched it too.*
>
> ***Interviewer:*** *hhmmm, let's start with the positives then, what would you say they were?*
>
> ***Nicole:*** *the social interaction…being able to meet people from all over the world exactly.*
>
> ***Interviewer:*** *anything personal for you - have you learnt about yourself?*
>
> ***Nicole:*** *hmm.. yeah i spose, its helped me not care whether people take me for me or not….either they like me and take me as me, or they dont, either way im happy*

In this quote, it is apparent that MMO gaming has had a significant impact on Nicole's life – both in personal and social interaction, and in personal development. With respect to personal interaction, the presentation of self to her boyfriend Simon in the role of 'girlfriend' (Goffman, 1961) has been reinforced. Furthermore, her social interaction has led to a positive psychological impact, with her social interaction leading to the development of her real self (Rogers, 1951). Another example of this personal development can be found in the interview with Gianna:

> ***Interviewer:*** *Have you learnt or discovered anything in WoW that has had relevance to your RL?*
>
> ***Gianna:*** *i guess there hasn't been anything specific but i think the most important thing re rl has been interacting with so many different people - people i wouldn't normally interact with in rl.*
>
> ***Interviewer:*** *…and what would you say you've got from that?*

> **Gianna**: *i guess it's made me less likely to judge a book by its cover. and more open to things like RP, and, indeed, computer games.*

Through social interaction, Gianna has experienced personal development which has influenced her self-schemas (Markus, 1977) in being more open to other people and less judgemental. Lastly, this final extract shows that for Alexa, gaming has had a profound impact upon her life:

> **Alexa**: *Playing WoW was the first major activity I found the energy for after several years of depression. It gave me hope that I would get more new interests and that I would eventually be well. Being a student I sat at home alone a lot, so something to spend time on and somewhere to meet people was useful to me. It gives you the same great experience as any work of fiction, but you are not a passive receiver, you are part of the story and you are active at all times. You interact with other people and make friends. Especially meeting people from other countries and age groups, since that happens less often in RL.*

As with Lauren, there is a frame of reference (Goffman, 1974) in this quote from Alexa, namely that her gaming is presented against the context of having a mental health problem. So, it is highly pertinent that she focuses on the interactive nature of the game, and particularly social interaction as the primary motivator for her gaming, supporting the idea that MMOs can help those with social phobia (Pearce, 2006). Drawing from the work of Markus and Nurius (1986), Alexa created a possible self where she "*would eventually be well*", which represented both a motivator and template for further change. The idea of change is also reflected in other interviews, with Greg remarking that "*the MMO world allows me to explore the parts of me that would be hard to express in RL*" and Maddie noting that gaming is "*part of who I am…has been for a very very long time…its a way to relieve stress, have fune, and with the advent of online play, a way to be social and have fun with friends.*" For both, the experience of gaming has allowed for the integration of those experiences into the offline self-concept, a conclusion also found by Hefner et al. (2007). For Herbert, gaming has been characterised by an involvement with the gaming community that has led him to teach himself Japanese, with him remarking that "*I feel that it has been a personal gain for me somehow to have this interaction even if it is only superficial.*"

In each of these cases, the self-schema (Markus, 1977) of the individual will have altered as a product of the repeated engagement with the associated activity (Barclay, 1986). In MMOs this process is even more pronounced given the opportunity to engage in new, unusual experiences that may well be schema incongruent, so leading to additional processing and encoding (Hastie, 1981). The building blocks of the Self Memory System (Conway, 2005) are altered, and in so doing will alter the autobiographical memory, and processing of related goals in the working memory (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989). The concept of the bricolage also comes to mind where, through the interaction between the player and the environment (Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Stein & Markus, 1996), both the actor and the means of interaction with the virtual space are altered. It is apparent therefore that playing can have a significant impact on the lives of players, but the effect occurs across a multitude of areas, namely the concept of self, friendships, psychological health, entertainment, and learning new skills.

3.3.2 Emotionality (Character aesthetics)

A key aspect of the presentation of self is the emotional connection players have to their character, with the look, or aesthetics of a character being a central component in that relationship. Appearances can be highly significant when considering initial impressions, and are a source of considerable emotional satisfaction or discontent, so it is unsurprising that players prefer to have control over the appearance of their avatar (Schroeder, 2002), with a concurrent increase in enjoyment experienced (Bailey et al., 2009):

> **Maddie**: *There are various things I consider when making a toon. However, the main things are that each usually contains a piece of me (be it in complexion, hair color, hair length, favourte colors, or perceived traits…in Guild Wars, since all characters are human, choosing came down solely to looks. I played around and my first toon was physically me, or as close as I could make it at the time. This was a warrior gal. Then I wanted to try further professions (classes) and since looks are tied to profession in GW, I ended up with ranger, and then a mesmer, and then an elementalist, all with red hair...Heheh*

With respect to Character aesthetics, the motivations appear to have two main strands – that of pleasing the player with respect to how they wish to exist within the virtual environment (internal), and that of how they wish to be seen by other players (external). In the excerpt from Maddie, her primary motivation appears to be an internal frame of reference, since it is important for her that some element of her offline concept of self is retained in the game. This is reminiscent of work by Bluck and Alea (2002) who noted that the self aspect of the autobiographical memory allows for a sense of continuity – it is proposed that by having a commonality between the offline physical self and the online virtual character, the player is more easily able to establish an emotional bond with the avatar and to engage in experiential merger (Klimmt et al., 2010). Similarly, in SL, players have been noted to create a primary version of self (Gilbert et al., 2014), which acts as a means of 'placing' the offline self in the virtual environment – with the additional benefit of being more easily socially recognised (Childs, 2011).

The concept of the internal frame of reference is also reflected in the interview with Charlotte who said that, with respect to her characters, she '*just don't wanna look ugly lol*'; again, there is an emphasis on hair with the response of '*hair lol, I love hair*' to the question of whether special attention was given to a particular area. As previously mentioned, people will generally replicate what they already know (i.e. a bipedal humanoid), since without a concerted effort, they are naturally limited by their own corporeal experiences (O'Brien, 1999). Similarly, as Ducheneaut et al. (2009) pointed out, across three different games platforms, hair style and colour was important, since in both the online and offline worlds it is highly malleable and can represent many different elements. Looks are also identified by Hattie who said she wanted '*definitely something attractive…because who doesn't want to be pretty?*' when asked about character aesthetics, with the recognition that she '*noticed that when I don't particularly like something about my character (for example, the gear they get) I tend to not want to play it*'.

In all of these quotes, there is an emotional fuelled motivation to achieve a certain aesthetic 'standard' in their characters, but without any particular reference to an external source of approval. This is not to say that that may not play a role, but it would appear that the driving cognition is one drawn from their concepts of beauty. Interestingly however, not all players buy into the standard concepts of beauty, with Gabriel remarking that he '*used to like pure handsome, now its more, the uglier the cooler.*' Gabriel's primary character was an undead warrior, with rotting flesh and bare bones

exposed – a far cry from the beauty desired by Charlotte and Hattie – and potential clashing with Bluck and Alea's (2002) work concerning continuity of the self. However, in Gabriel's extract, the emotional connection is not based on beauty, but referenced through the concept of 'coolness' – with the idea of what looks 'cool' as being a more pertinent way of visually presenting a version of self, rather than replication of an aspect of self (e.g. Maddie), or standard measures of 'beauty' (e.g. Charlotte). This is also in contrast to research suggesting that players tend to choose attractive races when creating a character (Ducheneaut et al., 2009), although there is evidence to suggest that players will try out races that are unavailable to them online (Nakamura, 2001). A nuance on this issue is revealed in the following quote by Eli:

> **Eli**: *I think that younger kids are attracted to playing humans. Kind of like "I want to look like this when I get older" type of a deal. Same for rogues, I just think younger players are more into the sneak attack and kill them fast classes. Older males typically like to tank, older players, shyer players, in general and women tend to play healers more often.*

On the basis of anecdotal evidence through casual conversation with gamers, and through my own personal experience, younger players tend to play both 'good' factions, and human characters – on the basis that people will replicate what they know (Linares et al., 2011; O'Brien, 1999). The same can be said for players who are unfamiliar with MMOs as a genre, with such players tending to choose Human or Night Elf races in WoW, due to their aesthetic beauty and corporeal familiarity (in contrast to a dwarf or orc for example). As Eli's quote also intimates, younger players might well see their characters as possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), so necessitating human avatars, given a strict interpretation of possible selves as referencing the physical form as well as potential identity attributes. The concept of 'coolness' is also shown in the following extract from Grace's interview:

> **Interviewer**: *so...when you create a character, do you imbue it with some part of yourself, as it were?*
>
> **Grace**: *It's all me. I like to have fun with my characters. In real life i like things to look good, clothes have to match. I bought one of those tabards from ebay, so it would match my gear. I don't use a gun, because my night elf looks weird using it.*

> *Interviewer: so your characters are all you then, i.e. your rl you. :)*
>
> *Grace: Yeah, my characters are all me. If there drops an item that looks weird or ugly, i don't want to take it. It may sound weird but, i to keep my char's looking good…I have a lot of dresses just for fun. :)*

Supporting evidence suggesting that players tend to spend considerable time customizing their characters (Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009; Villani et al., 2012), the extent of Grace's desire to have good looking equipment is illustrated by buying tabards from eBay – a direct example of an offline attitude resulting in a specific online presentation of self, in this situation facilitated by an interaction between two virtual environments. As evidenced earlier, some players will seek to present an alternative version of self in a MMO, whereas others prefer to replicate their offline self. For Grace, there is a combination of influences, in so much as she replicates her offline version of self, but only in the facet of identity. In terms of aesthetics, there is no such desire, but instead a metric based on internal gratification, and external approval – she is playing to the audience (Goffman, 1959), through the manipulation of the symbolic elements embedded within the character, e.g. titles, Guild membership, armour types, weaponry, etc. (Tronstad, 2008). These extracts also support research into SNS, where photos have been found to be a good, informal way of expressing the self (Suler, 2008), with the specific uploading of positive photos (Dorethy et al., 2014), and untagging of one's name in negative ones (Binder et al., 2009).

3.3.3 Social Interaction

Whilst the player avatar is the visual focal point for the creation of a version of self, there are many other elements that play a role. For many players, the friendships they make in-game are the most important reason for playing the game, and in addition they provide the primary audience for self-presentation – as such other players are both motivations and the point of reference for player actions. For symbolic interactionist theorists (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) this is critical in the performance of the self since it is only through reference to, and interaction with, the audience that the individual can create their own version of self. Using GT terminology, social interaction is one of the *processes* through which the cognitive and affective elements of the self-

schemas can be enacted, with research on a number of virtual spaces highlighting the important of social interaction to the user (Papacharissi, 2002b). In the following extracts Ellie illustrates that the presentation of self is instrumental in both the initiation and importance of friendships.

> ***Ellie****: I try to be polite and help people...if someone asks questions on the general chat I help if possible...I try to come across very much as myself…I've made a few friends out of being me anyway, so sticking to this isn't such a bad thing :)*

> ***Ellie****: If I try to just keep to myself and keep quiet, I get a bit down…It's not like I run around talking to random people, but if friends are online I'll chat…If I don't talk to them I feel alone*

In the first example, Ellie indicates how she presents a version of self that is true to her offline self so indicating very little difference between her online and offline versions of self – it is purely the enactment of the communicative function of autobiographical memory (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000). This is also a version of self that is intentionally produced, as the phrase "*I try to come across very much as myself*" indicates, using the tactic of ingratiation (Jones & Pittman, 1982), which has resulted in friendships being established. The Actual self of Higgin's (1987) work is being enacted, with no evidence of either an ideal self (Higgins, 1987) or possible (Markus & Nurius, 1986) self being evoked. Having created friendships, it is also apparent that continued interaction is required for the presentation of a viable version of self. This reflects one of the properties of the concept – the importance of friendship – with Ellie showing that friends are not only important in the version of self she wishes to project, but that there is also a significant life impact. This is also reflected in the interview with Alexa, with friendships being the primary motivation for playing MMOs:

> ***Alexa****: At some point I realized that the game world was a mirror to the real world. People were there to achieve through skill and hard work, just like in RL. I was there for friends, just like in RL.*

As with Ellie, a core element of Alexa's presentation of self was the maintenance of social bonds, which tied into concepts of both her offline self-schema (Markus, 1977) and Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach. From her characterisation of the game world as a 'mirror to the real world' it is suggested that from the perspective of self as Structure she is referencing her offline self (as seen in SNS by Lampe et al., 2008) in creating an actual version of self (Higgins, 1987). This is not true of all gamers however, with social interaction being mediated by more than just friendship, with evidence suggesting that it can be influenced by in-game events. In the following extract, the impact of prior gaming can be seen:

> **Interviewer***: what about RP - do you do much of that?*
>
> **Lauren***: …there is still a bit of rp ... actually a few of us like to hang around in bars and tell tales of our youth (wow youth)*

In this extract, Lauren also illustrates the complex nature of the interaction between virtual and real world environments. Using game mechanics Lauren is interacting with other players, who she well may have never met, to discuss the actions of characters that exist only as pieces of data on a computer server. In doing so, they are engaging in the nostalgic discussion of prior gaming events when their characters were 'younger'. Firstly then, Lauren is engaging in the social act of nostalgic reminiscing, through the recollection of pseudo-autobiographical memories, as Belk (2013) inferred. This is a moment which involves her self memory system since she has to balance desired goals of the conversation (within her working memory) with her autobiographical knowledge of what interaction she has had with the other players. However, it is debatable whether she is accessing her own autobiographical memory when discussing the actions of her character – it is her memory (since she was there to witness the event), but Lauren the player did not cast a fireball, her character did. This is an area that requires more attention, but it seems likely that whilst it is an autobiographical memory in terms of her being a witness to the event, that there is a separate memory system for each character and what they have done. Given her assertion that there is still some RP, it seems even more likely that each character is given its own space to exist, and that her own autobiographical memory serves more of an executive function in managing those character memories.

Social interaction is not purely about friendships however, and in the following quote Boris references PvP playing:

> **Boris***: "When a character begins to a build a reputation, which builds your online reputation through them, they become more important as the character progresses. This is especially prevalent in PvP, where people tend to remember names a bit more.*

As with Lauren's quote, there is the idea of progression of a character, but this time there is no shared conversation, with the memory being based purely in aggressive and hostile actions. However, both from the perspective of the self-memory system (Conway, 2005) and Goffman (1959), such actions are entirely coherent with both of these positions. Although there are some differences to the Lauren quote due to the singular nature of the action (i.e. fighting another player), the issue still exists as to where the nature of memories 'lies'. However, in Boris's quote, there is an indication of the processes involved, with his saying that '*people tend to remember names a bit more*'. It is clear that the self as a process is particular apparent here, with Jones and Pittman's (1982) intimidation tactic seeming highly appropriate.

These extracts, together with those in the previous section, indicate that MMOs are very social places – whether as a place to represent the actual self, or as a means of engaging with enemy players. In effect, it is through the *process* of social interaction that people interact with other players, thereby creating the consequences which then will feed back into the general context of the interaction, their motivations for future discussion, and the thoughts and emotions that make up their (self) schemas, and autobiographical memories.

3.3.4 Motivations

Having looked at some of the elements involved in the presentation of self, it is clear that there a myriad number of reasons as to why players play MMOs. First and foremost, it must be acknowledged that all virtually players play the game to enjoy themselves (Lin & Lin, 2011; Livingston et al., 2014), but the question to be considered is what forms those types of 'enjoyment' take. For some players, their play is linked to the presentation of self (Demetrovics et al., 2011), whilst for others social interaction is

the dominant motivating factor (Frostling-Henningson, 2009; Fuster et al., 2012; Lin & Lin, 2011). In the following extract Greg evidences motivations based both on the self, but unusually, ideological elements:

> **Interviewer:** *…so what about the chaos bit? why are they attractive to you?*
>
> **Greg:** *Ah, that is my darker side…Magus toy with the unknown, seek knowledge above all else, and fall to chaos because of that, I understand the reasons it could happen…I become obsessive about finding answers to things…so, RL I have to control that a bit…The chosen is just a champion for a certain creed and in many ways I understand that as well because there is no way I would tell my boss I would like to live in an anarchist society*
>
> **Interviewer:** *hhmmm, could have complications i'd say...*
>
> **Greg:** *It could never work…*
>
> **Interviewer:** *…so, what part of your personality does chaos appeal to then?*
>
> **Greg:** *the more private part, the idealist.......sounds strange yeah. I'll explain…The empire represents conventionalist society, the rule of law, the church, politics, business and such…Chaos represents ideas and beliefs unbridled, the only problem is......people let the idea spin out of control….In game this would be the zealot personality…No control , just zealous devotion*

Greg expressed a complex sentiment that clearly related to his offline version of self, strongly indicating a motivation to exist, at least in virtual form, in a more anarchistic world. He identified with two different characters from the Chaos faction – the Mage and the Champion, each surrounded by elements of game lore which he could map onto elements of his offline concept of self (Markus, 1977). As such, for Greg, the presentation of self in the MMO is motivated not purely by individual psychological drives, but also by an ideological belief system that cannot be lived in his offline life. This impression is reinforced in other points in his interview, and as the following extended quote shows.

> **Interviewer:** *when you create a character, what goes through your mind?*
>
> **Greg:** *A couple of things, first, how will I play it, then is the cahracter going to suit my personality…eg, healers are hard for me to play because I get impatient with healing*

Interviewer: why so?

Greg: *I guess, because I help people to sort out their life all day, I need to balance that with some mindless violence. I like to feel balance and I cant club someone who annoys me on the street. So thats why I usually play an orc, CLub everyfing!*

Interviewer: it sounds like your chars then are played partially depending on your RL, and partially for game play tactics - is that about right?

Greg: *Yep. Ive always like Orcs, they have simple lives, eat drink sleep bash, I envy them :)*

Interviewer: what is it about destruction that attracts you?

Greg: *depends, for the orcs it is their character. for chaos it is the belief in something that is not accepted by common society, the right to choose for yourself*

Interviewer: hhmmm, interesting; let's start with the orcs first - can you expand upon that a bit? :)

Greg: *I think so. Orcs are really a force of nature, they do not fight for wealth or power, just because it is natural for them, I like that.*

Interviewer: why does that appeal to you then?

Greg: *Because there is no malice in their actions, only primal behavior*

Interviewer: and that's partially how you see yourself, would like to see yourself?

Greg: *Hmm, not RL, it would be interesting but....*

Greg: *Im not violent by nature, I just know that I like to do what I want, without constraints or worrying about what the neighbors will think.   I guess that is the crux of it. I have very strong ideas about personal freedoms.*

Interviewer: ah huh, and that's part of the orc ethos for you as well?

Greg: *yes, I like to think that RL I try very hard to let people choose what is right, of course, in game for an orc what is right is set at a much lower ethical level.*

It is clear from this, and the precious extract, that Greg is very self-aware – he is cognisant of his own desires and motivations, and his personal ideological perspective. This self-awareness imbues his thoughts and actions with a purpose that is not generally evidenced by other players. This is evidenced by his acknowledgement that he gets impatient with healing due to the demands of his real life that, presumably, involve a

more conciliatory approach. The central theme from this extract is that the game allows him to play out a version of self that he is incapable of doing in real life – as indicated by the statement that "*I like to feel balance and I cant club someone who annoys me on the street. So thats why I usually play an orc, Club everyfing!*" This is supported by the statement that "*Ive always like Orcs, they have simple lives, eat drink sleep bash, I envy them :)*", suggesting an ideal version of self (Higgins, 1987) which he'd like to attain. However, he is aware of the limitations in the viability of such a role model, and therefore it can be hypothesised that this is not a possible self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). In effect, it is a version of self that he wishes to play out in the MMO, but not transfer to the real world (although it may be acknowledged that this is more due to societal standards, not necessarily due to his own desire to restrain that side of himself). This is a primary reason why virtual environments are such potent spaces for the presentation of self, because there is a viable split between the real and virtual worlds, where any cross-over can be substantially minimised. This is not to say that there is no impact for the player, but the effect on other people can be reduced.

However, before addressing the idea of 'Escape' as a motivation for playing MMOs, it must be acknowledged that the desire to start playing may come from unexpected sources.

> **Interviewer**: *when did you start playing?*
>
> **Lauren**: *well its interesting ...I was feeling very isolated from my family - my son, daughter and husband were all playing* [World of Warcraft]*…I said I wanted to try it out - they were all pretty shocked*
>
> **Interviewer:** *heh, why's that do you think?*
>
> **Lauren:** *I have never really liked that they all spent so much time gazing at the screen ...lol…I'm a really social person and much prefer interacting with 'real people' ... or so I thought*

Lauren made it clear that it was social isolation from her family that initiated her gaming, so that it was the context of her offline life that was the core motivator, not any particular desire to achieve anything online. As such, and considering the self as a process, her primary self-presentation tactic was one of supplication (Jones & Pittman,

1982), or seeking sympathy, although in all likelihood, this likely rapidly changed to ingratiation and self-promotion.

The chance to escape the responsibilities of the offline world is another powerful motivator, as evidenced by Hattie, who said "Well I just enjoy playing so much because it's my little escape from reality, and I love it!" For many players, this is one of the primary motivations for playing the game, together with the enjoyment experienced, as Yee (2006b) and Demetrovics et al. (2011) have noted:

Ellie: well I only know 1 person irl from WoW, and when I'm playing with him, I'm still me, but other people who don't know me, as I said think I'm a lot younger. I don't know if it's what I say, or how I come across, but there I am

Interviewer: sounds nice tbh :)

Ellie: it is…I get to be accepted for me and not mum, or soccer club secretary

Interviewer: sounds like a bit of relief from rl then?

Ellie: for sure…I get to just be a rogue or whatever

For Ellie, the motivation to play is intrinsically bound to her own perception of herself, through her self-schema (Markus, 1977) and the self function of autobiographical memory (Pillemer, 1992). In many respects, she was not following the common pattern of creating an ideal or actual version of self (Higgins, 1987), but was actively and wilfully dropping the externally mandated version of self; in effect, and using Goffman's (1961) role theory terminology, she was able to temporarily suspend the role of 'mum' or 'soccer club secretary' and be a rogue instead. In doing this, one might think she was getting close to the idea of the true self (Rogers, 1951), it might also be suggested that like Greg, she is constructing a version of self that is imminently disposable – picked up when required, and then discarded as quickly. For Ellie, there is almost a palpable sense of release in playing a MMO character when she refers to her real life roles, something that is reflected in Alexa's interview where she said "*Ingame is my one chance to be seen as a person, not as a representative of my sex.*" Although not the focus on this research, future work might profit from looking at the temporary discarding of offline roles, whether based on function or gender.

Throughout these extracts, there is a clear sense of the will to be in control of their characters – something which in itself has been linked to the enjoyment of MMOs (Bailey et al., 2009; Schroeder, 2002). The work of Ryan and Deci (Deci & Ryan, 2008) addresses this desire in their self-determination theory, which posits autonomy, competence, and relatedness as being core motivating drives. In Greg's extract the importance of personal freedoms is made plain, underscored by an ideological belief system that is unlikely to be fulfilled, but it is in the virtual world that Greg can fully enact the autonomy that he really desires. Similarly, for Ellie, the MMO environment allowed her to drop certain roles that she was morally, or voluntarily, obligated to maintain – the virtual space enabled her to be more fully in control of her own destiny, albeit in a temporary, and virtual, way. For Lauren, it is apparent that her loneliness and isolation from her family was the primary motivation for her starting to play, and that in doing so, she was able to sate a need for connectedness. Finally, a desire for competence can be seen in earlier quotes by Grace who talked of a desire to look good, and Boris who talked of building a reputation in PvP play, through which he could intimidate enemy players.

3.3.5 Nature of MMOs

As indicated in the previous section, various motivations exist for playing MMOs, and for some players, there is a quantifiable difference between how they present their version of self in the offline and online environments. However, how the player views the environment plays a role in this process because, as indicated in previous chapters, it creates the affordances that facilitate or inhibit the presentation of the desired version of self. The following extract from the interview with Alexa illustrates this point:

> **Alexa**: *Unless I role play, I am being myself. In that respect the game is like a chat room. I am myself whether I chat on the internet, talk on the phone, write an email or write a letter on paper. Can't see that there is an "online me" that is different from me just because I happen to use a computer to communicate. I can also role play in real life as well as online.*

I don't quite understand these questions. GL is a part of RL, just like reading a book or watching TV is a part of RL. They all feed my imagination and I find nothing strange in that…

For Alexa, there is no distinction between the offline (RL) and online (GL) environments – as she says she is no "online me" and for her the motivations for existing in the online environment are the same as those for the offline one. It might be argued that in terms of her self-concept, the environments are seen as so similar as to not require any activation of the phenomenal self (Jones & Gerard, 1967) or going beyond the pre-attentive state of Leary and Kowalski (1990), resulting in no enhanced activation of the self within the working memory system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Williams et al., 2007). It is important to point out that in terms of the presentation of self, Alexa is similar to Lauren or Herbert (from section 3.3.2), in as much as the actual self is being displayed. However, if a player sees no difference between the offline and online spaces, this will significantly limit their awareness of the potential possibilities of the new (virtual) space. Similarly, Vernon talks about similarities between the online and offline worlds – although not going as far as Alexa in claiming them to be synonymous:

Vernon: *I think actually everything the character does is a direct reflection of the real world as long as this is not taken too literally; when it goes to kill mobs it's a bit like doing chores for the real person. Both have pretty much the same effect for me; i.e keeping the basics of the environment workable.*

For Vernon, there is acknowledgement of the two worlds as being similar but there is no indication of wanting to engage in the active presentation of an alternative version of self. This ambivalence towards the nature of MMOs can be seen in other interviews, with Charlotte saying that she had no expectations of the player controlling a particular class "because at the end of the day it's just wires connected together that can be easily removed" and Vernon again confirming his viewpoint, saying that "do I think there is such a unique element to the virtual as to merit its distinction from the real world? No." These viewpoints represent a nihilistic view of MMOs, and one that is at odds with most MMO players – evidence has been presented acknowledging the point that not all players wish to replicate themselves in-game, there has generally been the

recognition that the virtual spaces are, at least, different. The presentation of self is predicated on the interaction between the environment and the psychology of the individual (Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Stein & Markus, 1996); it is merely that for some players the distinction is negligible, such that there is no difference between the front and back regions, using dramaturgical terminology (Goffman, 1959). However, Goffman would argue that the distinction is still there, even if the individual is not aware of it – because the interaction is as much created by the audience (and environment), as by the actor. As such, interacting in a virtual space *is* different to offline interaction, partially because the audience may regard the space as being different, but also due to the affordances provided by that space – a reflection of the fluid nature of the space (also noted in blogs by Viégas, 2005). This conclusion is supported by existing research which found that players who saw the boundary between real and virtual as being malleable where less likely to have separate versions in self, in comparison to those who saw the boundary as being more distinct (McLeod & Leshed, 2011). Alexa and Vernon, in seeing the boundary between the online and offline worlds as being malleable, and potentially insignificant, would have no reason to create a new version of self in the MMO, since it offered no new opportunities for the presentation of self.

However, some players do see a difference between the virtual and real world, with the earlier quotes of Greg and Ellie indicating a material difference in the two – or at least in the affordances they provide. In his interview, Tim said "characters of a different gender I treat as people of my gender, as in the end, world of internet is a world of anonymity, where nothing is what it seems like." Tim is correct in his assertion concerning the anonymity of the Internet, with its effects having been remarked upon by many researchers (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Suler, 2002), however it would appear to suggest that there is a discrepancy in the way that virtual worlds are viewed. Since it cannot be denied that the type of virtual space (i.e. Facebook, Second Life, MMOs, etc.) create their own affordances, and that there are quantifiable differences between virtual and real spaces, it would seem logical that the differences referenced by the players refer to the capacity of those spaces to allow the existence, or presentation, of self. In this respect, it must be concluded that for Alexa and Vernon the affordances of the virtual world are considered to be irrelevant, or so transparent as to be negligible.

3.4 Overview of Theoretical Structure

The Core Category of **Presentation of the Online Gaming self** has five sub-concepts. In this model the core category is an entirely abstract concept, without quotes of its own – in this respect it is acting as a binding point for the five sub-concepts, where it is hypothesised that players will draw upon each of the sub-concepts by varying degrees, as the formulate their own unique way of presenting their version of self. The most significant of these is the *Elements of self* which looks at concepts relating to how the gamers view themselves and the processes by which they play with concepts of the self. *Social interaction* covers a range of concepts but all relate to activities involving one or more other players. *Motivations* looks at the reasons why players engage in gaming, and specifically in manipulating their version of self, whilst *Emotionality* talks of the emotional connections players make to their characters, and to the game itself. Finally, the *Nature of MMOs* looks at how players view these virtual environments and their characteristics.

Throughout the interviews it was apparent that there exists a huge spread of motivations, actions, reactions and contexts which form the backdrop for particular player's actions. Against all of that however, the presentation of the self from a Goffmanian (1959) perspective seems particularly valid – the MMO being a perfect environment for presenting versions of the self, without the physical and social restrictions that exist in the offline world. From a Goffmanian tradition, when in front of other people the person is giving a performance; so given the extent to which people interact socially, there is regular presentation of self. This occurs even when there is no-one to perform to – even without a physical audience to play to, with the audience reaction being imagined. As such, this thesis is not arguing that players engage in *more* presentation of self since, by definition, such a concept would be invalid – one cannot engage more so in an activity which one is already doing.

Instead, the thrust of this thesis is that MMOs allow people to engage in the presentation of self in a way that other offline and online environments cannot provide, though the use of multiple roles, different classes and races, etc. It is the difference in the potentiality of the *space* that enables players to participate in the presentation of self.

Figure 3.1: Simplified Model of Presentation of Self in MMOs

Presentation of the Online Gaming Self

Emotionality	Nature of MMOs	Elements of Self	Social Interaction	Motivations
Losing a Character	Joined Realities	Offline Concept of Self	Friendships	Escape
Character Aesthetics		Character creation (includes Class, Race and Faction Choice, and Spontaneity)	Social referencing	Offline motivations (includes Reference to Offline Past)
		First characters		
		Life impact		

3.5 Discussion

This chapter has outlined the qualitative model derived from the GT analysis of interview data, and in doing so has proposed a five factor model that seeks to clarify the presentation of self in MMOs. Drawing on the theory and research discussed in chapters one and two, the model seeks to explain the context, processes, and motivations inherent within such an action, in a way that is grounded in the data and, in so doing, can ensure methodological rigour.

Each person has a unique set of experiences that make up his or her perspective of the world that, referencing the self memory system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Conway, 2005), will influence the goals that they strive to attain. Greg's experiences of growing up in a stifling environment in Australia led to his moving to a city, with the concurrent development of an ideological belief system that strongly valued personal autonomy. The context of Lauren's interaction is not predicated on a temporal comparison (Wilson & Ross, 2001), but on the regions of her existence, to use dramaturgical terminology (Goffman, 1959). In both cases, personal experience has contributed to the way that the player engages with the game, what they wish to achieve and subsequently, through their characters, how they present a version of self to other players. Of course, this is not a linear process, but a recursive one, where all experiences are embedded within the autobiographical memory (Pillemer, 1992), and influence further interaction. This is the core of the self as a structure – a series of schematic representations of the world that influence, and are influenced by, interaction with the world, whether that be an online or offline one.

With this context in mind, each player will (by default) present a version of self when playing a game – although their motivation, degree of replication, means of doing so, level of social interaction, and understanding of the nature of the virtual world all influence this presentation. The offline version of self is the single most important determinant of the self created in the MMO, since it is the baseline by which all other versions will be measured. Whether the individual chooses to replicate the offline self (e.g. Alexa or Herbert) or to create a new version (e.g. Ivan or Pete), it must be done with the offline self in mind, since it is only through comparison to that self that the success of the new one can be established. In effect, the concept of the external audience, as posited by Goffman (1959), also exists internally – for there must be some

means by which the individual assesses the validity and potential success of a new construct. So, it is through the self memory system that players can construct and evaluate a version of self – whether it is Grace creating a character that enables her to disappear (metaphorically and literally in game), or Robert creating a more social version of self. By negotiating current self-presentation goals in the working memory (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989) with existing knowledge (Pillemer, 1992), the player can create a product for external consumption. Character creation is a critical point in this juncture, since it affords players the opportunity to mould the physical appearance of their character (plus game story related choices in some MMOs, e.g. Guild Wars 2) – such that Lauren wanted to create a character that embodied her philosophical approach to nature, and Greg had multiple character to represent different aspects of his offline self-concept. Of course, there are a plethora of motivations that feed into the self-concept and thereby produce these behaviours – some of which are not related to the construction of the self, e.g. for the sake of in-game utility (Livingston et al., 2014), to explore the game (Fuster et al., 2012; Hsu & Lu, 2007), and for purely aesthetic reasons (Fron et al., 2007). For some, their playing is related to the self – whether due to a desire to explore the self-concept (Demetrovics et al., 2011) as evidenced by Greg, or as a means of temporarily escaping one's offline existence (Frostling-Henningson, 2009), as indicated by Ellie.

However, these actions are mediated by the individual's conceptualisation of the MMO virtual space – so if the player sees no difference between the two then it is unlikely that the space will be seen as affording any new opportunities, a position taken by Alexa who saw the spaces as being directly analogous. In addition, the working self-concept construct is tempered through social interaction – where the self-concept created through the self-memory system is actioned, where the self becomes a process. Finally, and as already hinted at, the experiences within the MMO will lead to additional complexity within the autobiographical memory that, in time, might be manifested within the construction of self – whether through in-game behaviour (e.g. Maddie using to relieve stress) or in the offline world (e.g. Herbert being motivated to learn Japanese).

3.5.1 Study Reflexivity

The single most important point of reflexivity in the thesis is the recognition that I am a gamer, and this had an impact on the research, both positive and negative. Following Finlay's (2002a) criteria, this initial impact was in the pre-research stage – namely that having played MMOs, I was in a position to identify potentially fruitful areas of research. With respect to data collection, my gaming experiences have again had an impact. In terms of the questions asked, the first study interview schedule was based on a pilot study (Meredith et al., 2008) which established core areas to be examined. The creation of the pilot study questions was based upon experiences of gaming, and therefore it is arguable that this gaming knowledge influenced those questions. However, although the questions narrowed answers down to the topic of self-presentation, they were still broad enough to allow for all answers within that topic.

My background as a gamer also allowed me to establish rapport with the participants faster than might otherwise be expected. With existing knowledge of many of the games and of game terminologies I was able to 'prove' my gaming credibility and thereby gain the confidence of the participants. In addition to previous gaming knowledge it should be acknowledged that I knew a number of the first study participants (approximately 40%), given that they were in his World of Warcraft guild. Whilst there is no evidence that this altered the information gathered, it does explain the apparent overfamiliarity shown in some of the quotes.

A further benefit was my knowledge of the capacity of such games to act as a means of constructing self, allowing me to tap into this concept more easily and ask probing questions. Of course, this might have allowed for the bypassing of contradictory evidence by discounting it and focusing on such elements of interview which benefitted a 'positive' answer to the research questions. However, I was already aware that many players do not utilise games in the presentation of self and so was prepared for the full range of responses, with this awareness protecting me from ignoring contradictory information. In addition, whilst I suspected that presentation of self might occur in MMOs, I had no knowledge about the elements that might make up that process.

The use of interviews in the study could have been problematic, particularly in an online context. Some of the interviews were fragmented in nature, with pertinent but

short pieces of text, which made analysis more troublesome. Also, since the participants were self-reporting their behaviour and I had no means of checking the veracity of their account, or even of their identity, it is possible that none of the described events occurred. However, without doing participant observation, checking the authenticity of any collected data is problematic and as such, this study falls within currently accepted parameters. It is also acknowledged that coding is a subjective process, and that another researcher may have drawn different conclusions from the data. Whilst this is undoubtedly true, qualitative research rests not on proving an analysis or theory, but in providing sufficient evidence that a proposed interpretation can be supported.

3.6 Chapter Summary

In looking at the results of Study One, this chapter has examined the data resulting from 29 interviews conducted either synchronously online or via email. The Study used a GT methodology to acquire the data, an appropriate method to use in the largely uncharted area of qualitatively based research of the presentation of self in MMOs. In the next chapter Study two will be discussed, which seeks to expand on existing concepts from the first study, but also to develop those new concepts that have arisen during the analysis of the first study data.

Chapter Four: Study Two

4.1 Chapter Introduction

This chapter examines the results of study two of the thesis, produced through the thematic analysis of qualitative data generated through an asynchronous focus group. As with chapter three, the methodology of the study is examined first, followed the thematic analysis results, and finishing with the integration of those results with the existing model.

4.1.1 Aim and Objectives

The aim of study two was to verify those areas developed in the previous study, with a view to elaborating existing concepts, and exploring new ones. This was achieved through the use of an online focus group, with the hope that a group methodology might provide a new perspective on the issues. Specifically, the following areas were examined further – the self as a template for character creation, the loss of a character, the motive of escape, reference to other players, and interactive immersion.

These conceptual topics were chosen for additional analysis for the following reasons. First, those concepts that appeared in the study one interview schedule but which needed further analysis – namely Character creation and the Emotional Connection to Characters. Second, remaining concept were those topics that arose during the interviews of Study One, and which were felt needed further elaboration in order to understand their impact upon the presentation of self in MMOs.

4.1.2 Rationale for the Study

Study one used individual interviews to gather data and in doing provided data that has established a strong model. However, focus groups were able to provide data of a more holistic nature, rather than individual interview data, so it was possible to identify common areas of identification within the participants. Kitzinger (1994) outlined several benefits to the use of focus groups, and whilst not all have been

accrued, the groups have provided that data supports the initial model. The Focus Group data have also reinforced the Core Category and sub-concepts, adding to the understanding of relationships between them.

4.2 Research Methodology

This section provides details on the methodology for study two, with an assessment of thematic analysis (TA), the recruitment of participants, the focus group processes, and the process of data collection.

4.2.1 Overview of Thematic Analysis

Origins of Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a type of qualitative analysis that has been used extensively in psychological research – from discrimination due to schizophrenia diagnoses (Rose et al., 2011), to the effectiveness of solution-focused therapy (I. Smith, 2011). Such is its prevalence that it is seen as the basic building block of qualitative analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; G. Ryan & Bernard, 2000); however Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed that it is a separate method in its own right. Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006) argued that whilst other qualitative methodologies are tied to an epistemological perspective, TA has no such ties and can be more accessible. They also argue that given it is not bound to an existing theoretical framework, TA is free to take on whatever perspective is appropriate.

Nature of Thematic Analysis

Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that each researcher should make their own theoretical position clear, which can be done by making apparent the thinking behind a number of decisions. First, Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that there should be no overly strict rules on what a theme is, since neither number of appearances nor weight in an analysis necessarily determines inclusion within the final report. They argued that

more important is the value of the idea in answering the research questions. Second, the researcher should also consider whether the intention to look at the entire data set, or does the report focus on a particular range of themes? The former is characterised by having a broader purview but is likely to lose complexity, whilst the latter provides a rich account of one aspect of the data, but is unlikely to illustrate the connections to other elements of the data set.

Third, given TA's theoretical freedom, it is capable of being used both inductively and deductively and so can be used equally well by a researcher. An inductive approach, similar to GT, allows for the emergence of themes from the data; in contrast, a deductive approach lends itself to specific questions relating to an existing theoretical framework.

Fourth, the researcher must decide whether to complete a semantic (explicit) level, or a latent (interpretative) one analysis. Analysis at a semantic level is characterised by identification of themes at a surface level, where the researcher derives meaning from those patterns. In latent analysis, the underlying meanings and constructions are investigated, and the final model represents a theorized construction, not merely a description.

Fifth, the epistemological approach taken during a research project influences the analysis conducted (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and the researcher should decide between employing an essentialist position, or a constructionist interpretation of the data. The essentialist style is typified by simple interpretations of talked experiences, given the underlying assumption that there is a direct relationship between language and experience. The constructionist interpretation understands meaning to be socially created, so does not focus on the individual psychological perspective, but emphasises context and the social construction of meaning.

Rationale for Choosing Thematic Analysis

The purpose of study two was to expand on the theoretical model developed in study one, and test if the group nature of focus groups would shed any additional light on the research questions. Given this premise, TA was the appropriate choice to analysing the data, since it could lend itself to any epistemological position, whereas the

use of IPA or Narrative analysis, etc. would have placed two competing positions against each other.

There are a number of potential disadvantages to using TA however, as Braun and Clarke (2006) identified. First, the simplicity of the method can be mistaken with being easy to do, which is not the case. TA must not simply be a description of the data, but must involve a coherent analysis, without overlapping themes. Second, the flexibility of TA can lead to paralysis on the part of the researcher since it can be applied to almost any type of qualitative data. In this thesis, this was not an issue, since study two was supporting study one and in doing so had provided the research questions. Third, Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that without an existing theoretical frame to support it, TA has a tendency to produce descriptive analysis. Again, given its association to study one and the GT analysis, this was not an issue for study two.

Having weighed the options concerning the possible types of analysis, with respect to its relationship to study one and the research questions, study two employed a balanced approach by examining emerging concepts against the existing model.

4.2.2 Research Procedure

As mentioned in chapter three, Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that before recruitment it is necessary to establish who will be recruited, where from, the type of data collected and how it is collected. This is done so that good methodological principles run throughout the research design, so ensuring rigour within the study.

Sampling Strategy

The purpose of study Two was to further the theoretical model developed in Study One, either through the exploration of new concepts, or via the development of existing ones. On this basis, expert purposeful sampling was used – a strategy that targets a particular group, on the proviso that only this group can deliver the required information (Trochim, 2006).

Recruiting Participants

Facebook was the chosen location for the study two focus group, for the primary reason for this was that the research was being advertised on the discussion boards of a number of existing MMO related groups, including 'Addicted to World of Warcraft', 'Warhammer Online' and 'I'm a girl and I play WoW', together with gaming forums. It was hoped that the fact the groups were on Facebook would improve the likelihood of people subscribing to the research group. Appendix VIII shows where the focus group was advertised.

The message on the Facebook groups and forums included introductory information, including my name, institution, contact details, reassurances that the study had been passed by the ethics committee of NTU, and information concerning a prize draw that the participants could enter if they wished. Again, as before, it was emphasised that only participants over 18 years old were allowed to take part. Forum administrators were contacted beforehand to establish the posts would be welcome and to gain credibility amongst the forum population. Given the nature of Facebook, there was no way of establishing which group the participants had come from and indeed, there was no way of confirming their identity, beyond their Facebook profile. However, there was no reason to suspect that a false profile had been created by a participant for the purposes of deception.

There has been extensive research debating the optimal numbers of group members for synchronous focus groups (Hughes & Lang, 2004; Mann & Stewart, 2006; Underhill & Olmsted, 2003), but very little concerning asynchronous ones. On that basis, several messages were left encouraging people to join the group, to enable a lively discussion. As an incentive to take part and bearing in mind the time commitment of all participants, the members of the focus group were entered (if they so wished) into a prize draw where they could win vouchers from Amazon.com. After the focus group were completed, the prize draw was completed by giving each participant a number and using a random number generator to draw the winners.

In total, 27 participants were initially recruited for the focus group. However, it quickly became apparent that not all group members were going to take part. In the six weeks that the group was open, 13 participants took part in the focus group – indicating a substantial disparity between the active and passive group members. Due to the semi-

public nature of the focus groups, no data was acquired concerning demographic information. It was thought that although the participants had agreed to take part in the research, they had not agreed to provide their age, sex, or location and as such, asking them for this in the focus group forums would have been a breach of trust. Since study one had not discovered any insights relating specifically to the age or gender of the participants, this was not considered problematic.

Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent

The ethics for the second study followed the ethical principles established for the first study. In this respect, it abided by the code of ethics of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and NTU ethics committees. As such, whilst the nature of the focus group precluded a traditional participant information sheet, consent form, and debrief sheet, it was absolutely necessary that fully informed consent was acquired, and that participants were fully debriefed after the research had ended.

Participants had been told of the function of the group and what would be required of them, *before* the group met up. This was to ensure that all participants had given fully informed consent, that they had agreed to take part without being under any false pretence, and they were not under 18 years old. In addition, all prospective participants were asked to maintain group confidentiality were they to take part.

Once the group met up, all members were again reminded of their ethical duties to the group and that they should not talk of what had been said to outsiders. In the group, a post was put up at the very outset reminding the participants of their ethical obligations, and again when the focus groups had finished. The post reminded participants of the following – (1) That they had the right to withdraw their data from the research, without having to give a reason for doing so; (2) That the data would be held on a secure computer; (3) That only the thesis author and supervision team would have access to the data; and (4) That the data would be held for a period of three years after such time as required for thesis validation, after which time it would be destroyed.

To reassure participants that their data was secure, the group was invitation only, so that only those people who agreed to take part were allowed to see the data – one of the criteria set by Krueger and Casey (2009) for establishing rigour in the research. Another measure to improve participant confidence was to allow participants

of the asynchronous groups to choose their own pseudonyms (Oringderff, 2004). However, to ensure full anonymity, all data has been completely anonymised and pseudonyms provided for the extracts. Given the nature of Facebook, anonymity could not be provided through the use of self-selected pseudonyms but this would have been understood by all participants, as users of Facebook itself. The Facebook group was deleted a set period of time after the group had finished.

4.2.3 Data Collection

This section provides information concerning the method of data collection, how the questions for the focus groups were developed, and information concerning the running of the focus groups.

Method of Data Collection

The primary aim of Study Two was to verify the existing theoretical model developed during the course of Study One, with the secondary aim of exploring the perspective provided through the focus group methodology.

Focus groups have been argued to have a number of advantages over individual interviews, including the opportunity to explore attitudes, the identification of group norms, and providing insights into social processes (Kitzinger, 1994). Furthermore, the environment can result in more data being acquired and of a richer vein than in comparison to individual interviews (Fern, 2001), with participant who are reluctant to be interview alone or who feel they have nothing to say being more likely to take part (Kitzinger, 1995). However, whilst focus groups can be productive, they require more effort to run successfully in comparison to interviews (Krueger & Casey, 2009). In addition, trying to measure the strength of opinion can be problematic although overall, Sim (1998) agreed that interviews and focus groups were complimentary techniques.

Research suggests that whilst traditional offline groups offer an all-round capacity for getting information, online groups can provide an international picture and excel in getting snapshots of a topic (Brüggen & Willems, 2009). Given the nature of MMOs as an international phenomenon, this made an online focus group highly suitable. Other advantages include the comfort of being at one's own home or office, more honest

opinions being expressed due to the anonymity experienced and everyone being able to have their say (Chase & Alvarez, 2000). Furthermore, the quality of information gathered through online groups has not been found to vary significantly from offline groups (Reid & Reid, 2005; Underhill & Olmsted, 2003).

However, there are drawbacks to using online focus groups, such as the potential difficulty of getting a participant to interact if being silent. Oringderff (2004) also acknowledged that there are issues in terms of the group dynamics, with a tendency for participants to develop 'pair friendships', characterised by the two participants only talking between themselves. In addition, an agreement to take part in a focus group does not guarantee turning up or saying anything if the participant is present (Oringderff, 2004; Stewart & Williams, 2005).

Comparisons between synchronous and asynchronous focus groups have tended to look at the quality of the interaction, with Fox, Morris and Rumsey (2007) arguing that the differences are relatively insubstantial. Oringderff (2004) compared the two groups, and concluded that whilst synchronous focus groups facilitate more spontaneous responses, asynchronous groups gain from allowing participants more time to consider their replies, by allowing people from different time zones to participate, and in making typing skills less of an issue. Having considered these options, it was decided to conduct an online asynchronous focus group since they are seen as a viable alternative to offline groups (Hughes & Lang, 2004; Tates et al., 2009), that would collect holistic data for the development of the thesis model.

Development of the Focus Group Schedule

Given the intention for the second study to extend the findings of study one, the creation of the focus group interview schedule was directly informed by the findings of the GT study. During the GT analysis each conceptual node had been characterised by a single defining feature, and this feature was used to create an associated question for the focus group study. An example would be the conceptual node 'First Character', with its associated question 'How important is your first character and why?'

Formal Focus Group Process

Before joining the focus group, all participants were provided with full information concerning the nature of the project, what would be required of them, and details covering ethical matters such as confidentiality and anonymity, and data withdrawal, etc. It was made clear to all participants that joining the focus group would be taken as active agreement that they would abide by the ethical guidelines, and consented to take part. Before the focus group was opened to the participants, a thread containing information about the study plus ethical information was posted in the forum with participants instructed that if they could not abide by those covenants, they would not be able to take part in the focus group. No participants declined to take part of the basis of those conditions.

Once sufficient time had been provided for the ethics material to have been read, the first topic thread was introduced. Sufficient time was given so that people could answer questions as they so wished, and then another topic thread was introduced. In this manner, all the topic threads were considered over a period of four weeks, with threads left upon for people to write additional material. Once the threads had gone quiet, the focus group was brought to a close, with the participants being thanked for their contribution with a reminder of their ethical obligations to the group. The asynchronous focus group ran for six weeks, a shorter period of time than that of Kenny (2005) who ran his focus group for eight weeks, but still sufficient for the purposes of data collection. The transcripts from the focus group are provided in appendix IX.

4.2.4 Process of Data Analysis

Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) analysis of TA, decisions were made concerning the intended nature of the analysis. This was done on the premise that TA, being free to mould itself to an epistemological position, could dovetail with the existing Grounded theory analysis of study one.

A 'theme' was understood to be any concept that was raised by at least two members of the group. It might have been possible to have included every concept raised, but since the aim of study two was to consolidate study one, introducing 'outlier'

concepts might have proved problematic. In this context, an outlier concept would have been one with a limited amount of evidence to support it. In terms of whether the analysis was trying to create a rich, broad description or a detailed account of one aspect, the focus groups were consolidating existing concepts; as such, it was straddling both of these variations – by developing any theme which matched a Study one theme, whether in depth or more superficially. Following the Grounded Theory analysis, the thematic analysis used a mainly inductive technique – so making sure the analysed data was grounded in the original raw data. However, it would be fallacious to argue that there was no theoretical guidance from that study. In effect then, the focus group analysis utilised an inductive mechanism but with awareness of the concepts that had already been established in study one.

The focus group analysis applied a semantic (explicit) method with respect to those themes that had already been established during Study 1. With those original themes that came up in the focus groups however, the latent (interpretative) themes were examined to bring the new data in-line with that of the first study. Finally, following the epistemology of the first study, the focus group analysis took a constructionist approach and argued that meaning and experience are socially generated.

The analysis of the focus group data was substantially faster than for study one – partially due to nature of the analysis itself, but also due to the concepts arising already being known. With this in mind, the analysis of the focus group data using TA followed the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2006). The first phase involved familiarising myself with the data, a task which had been partially achieved due to running the focus groups. However, since some time had passed between the start and finish of data collection, time was spent reading over all of the transcripts again. Having generated initial codes, themes were searched for both within and across the focus group transcripts, to achieve an integrated perspective of the data. These themes were reviewed – both against each other in order to reduce overlap, but also against the existing theoretical model developed in Study one. Many of the emergent themes mirrored those in the first model, and so were integrated into the existing structure. There were new themes however, which were refined and given their own names. Finally, the overall model was reviewed, to make sure that it was a fair representation of the underlying data, as found in the transcripts.

4.3 Qualitative Findings

As with study one, all quotes are verbatim and the names of players and their characters have been replaced with pseudonyms, with identifying information removed. As before, not all concepts drawn from the study are discussed, but those areas outlined in the chapter introduction are focused on.

4.3.1 Elements of Self

As identified in study one, the offline self is critical in understanding the presentation of self in MMOs; through the use of self schemas (Markus, 1977) and the Self Memory system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Conway, 2005; Williams et al., 2007), the self is represented in structural terms. The process of being displayed is dependent on the audience (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), the affordances of the physical / virtual and social environment (Clark & Uzzell, 2006; Gibson, 1977; Norman, 1999), and the use of various self-presentation strategies (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984) through which the self can be displayed.

Character Creation

As with the interviews, some members of the focus groups tended to wilfully replicate their offline self within their characters:

> **Christina**: *Character creation takes me freakin forever....as for my ingame personality - it mirrors my RL personality. I do my best to behave in game how I would in real life (ie not be a douche like so many seem to be)…as for multiple characters, they all are my personality, just different appearances/names/roles. So I wouldn't even say it's a different side of myself, just wanting to explore different aspects of the game…i too am attracted to the healer and tank roles…i'd say this does reflect my RL personality. my meyers-brigg typology is infj - often called the "protector" or "counselor"…i work for a charity organization with inner city at-risk youth. In game, i either want mobs to beat on me, or for me to heal those the mobs are beating on.*

It would appear that Christina does not explicitly attempt to replicate her offline version of self in her characters, but instead merely plays out her actual offline self through all of her avatars (Higgins, 1987). This is typified most clearly in her playing healer and tank characters, two roles that would appear to correlate with her offline existence. In effect, Christina does not choose to use MMOs as a place to explore concepts of herself, arguably because she is experiencing no cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962; Higgins, 1987) in her current self, and so has no motivation for doing so. A similar pattern can be seen in the following extract from Hanna's interview:

> **Hanna**: *I just like being feminine I guess, but I also like being a badass chick. A lot of men are considered "badass", but women who are badass are out of the ordinary. ;) Which I think goes along with my desire for individuality…I do believe there is a link between individuality in real life and in game. I try to live by the same codes in game that I do in real life. Although I do participate in the occasional role play, I cannot really vary too far from how I really am. In which case I do not think I roleplayed my orc nearly as well as I did my high elf, simply because orc's are seen as big stupid brutes, and high elves are seen as mellow, educated and intelligent....and of course in real life I am educated, and certainly like to believe that I am intelligent, haha.*

In a similar vein to Christina's extract, Hanna is broadly playing out a version of herself within the game – as evidenced by her desire to stand out from the crowd, particularly as being 'badass' (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). It is a little unclear as to the extent of the correlation between real and game life, but it would appear that Hanna is, to some extent, creating an ideal version of self within the game (Higgins, 1987). However, and referring to the definition of roleplaying referenced in the previous chapter, her attempts at role-play are misguided, in as much as she is only capable of playing out herself (as an Elf), rather than another character. Again, this would support the conclusion that she is playing an ideal version of self since even when attempting to be something else (i.e. an orc) she reverts to her offline self. This might cast doubt upon her assertion of creating a 'badass' figure within the game, and suggests that her characters might be substantially more aligned with pre-existing stereotypes (e.g. Orcs as big and stupid, Elves as mellow and educated) drawn from her schemas for such characters.

However, the concept of being a 'badass' was referenced by other group members, and in the following extract Mike talks about his choice of orcs:

Mike: My main was a hunter. I chose this because SHOCKER!!!!! I hunt IRL…I chose orc because of their pure badassness, but looking back, thats actually kinda what I look like.., I was a football player.

I grew up in the gym and in the fields though. I worked hard at what I did, thats what orcs represented to me. The workhorses of the horde. They also take a lot of pride in what they do. I am super proud of my accomplishments on the field and on the farm. So now that I have looked at it, yeah my personal life did reflect my character creation…
We had this boar on our farm, the main "stud" if you will, named Iroc…He wasn't mean or anything, but if he ever got pissed at me while I was in the pen with him, I would be in trouble…that's what I wanted to reflect in my character. Someone that commanded respect when you see him. It's the reason I have almost 100k Honorable kills and the Justicar title. I take pride in this character just the way I took pride in my real life. And you know what? People started running away from me when they saw me swooping down on my Vengeful Drake(whoo hoo season three gladiator XD). I commanded respect when they saw me.

In this extract, Mike indicated a desire to be represented as 'badass', in this case by a race (i.e. Orcs). Again, there is evidence that players draw from a body of pre-existing knowledge (frequently based on a Tolkienesque universe) that can inform their creation of alternate versions of self. For Mike, it is clear that his identification with the Orc race is more than just aesthetic, and taps deeply into elements of his own self-schema (Markus, 1977). Through the use of such phrases as 'workhorses of the horde' and 'proud of my accomplishments' it is clear that he has a strong affinity for the race. Indeed, the strength of his connection is so strong that to define it as a realisation of an 'actual' version of self seems to render it somewhat impotent; instead, it might be argued that playing an Orc is Mike's real version of self (Rogers, 1961). However, Mike also illustrates another side to his self-concept, that of wanting other players to know of his achievements. In telling the group about PvP players running away from him, it is clear that when presenting a version of self – i.e. enacting the self as a process – that intimidation is the primary tactic he uses (Jones & Pittman, 1982). To be fair, the PvP 'arena' is one that rewards aggression and such a tactic is clearly functional in its own

right, but it does also appear to sate some motivational element of Mike's gaming practice.

However, as with Study 1, there was evidence that the version of self presented was not necessarily stable, with the version of self created motivated by a number of factors. As the following extract by Patrick shows, real world events can impact upon this process:

> **Patrick:** *In all honesty, my characters have very little of me in them. They aren't my avatars, they are their own beings with they own personalities…*
>
> *It isn't my relationship with my toon that has changed, but rather my relationship with the class. For Vanilla and TBC all I wanted to do was hit things really hard. It was all about DPS. Video games = pew pew, right? Anyways.. on a whim I switched to healing. It has really changed the game for me. I feel as though I am more in touch with my class and understand it better. Same for when I ultimately ditched my DPS spec and took up tanking as well.*
>
> *Hmm..*
>
> *Now that I think about it, maybe the way I have evolved as a player and my choices of play style are a reflection of my growth IRL. I've gone from a fresh-out-of-school young man to a family man with a lot of responsibilities. Maybe the decision to become a healer and tank reflect that. I recognize more with protection roles.*
>
> *Could be my character reflects me more than I thought...*

In this illuminating extract, Patrick illustrates both the potential for MMOs to act as a place for the presentation of self, and also their flexibility in allowing for changes in the performance. There is evidence of a clear change in Patrick's thinking as he talks through his presentation of self in games, starting with the assertion that 'my characters have very little of me in them' through to the reflection that it 'could be my character reflects me more than I thought…' Indeed, the change to a family man has been reflected in his play style, with more protective and healing roles being favoured over straight damage dealing characters. The concept of 'experiential merger' (Klimmt

et al., 2010) seems particularly relevant here, with Patrick subconsciously having taken on the attributes of the character, with the symbiotic nature of the relationship between player and character being particularly apparent. This change is remarkable, and strongly infers that the self aspect of his autobiographical memory (Pillemer, 1992) has had a significant influence in altering the goals of his working memory (Markus & Wurf, 1987), albeit in such a fashion that he was unaware of it. Given that his presentation of self would appear to be subconscious in nature, this does raise the intriguing question of what version of self is being presented – although this lack of awareness is not unique, since it has been acknowledged that the phenomenal self can shift in and out of activity as the situation demands (Jones & Gerard, 1967). As with Mike, there are indications that some elements of the real self (Rogers, 1961) were represented, though it is suggested that nuances of an ideal self (Higgins, 1987) are also present, since Patrick, as with any other parent, cannot protect his child(ren) from all evils. This also presents an interesting contrast with that of Greg, from the previous chapter, who wanted to play an orc so as to 'club everyfing' and, in so doing so, play out aspects of himself that he did not wish to be seen in the real world. This comparison is to emphasise the point that MMOs have an inherent flexibility that enables them to allow for virtually all desired presentations of self; as with other virtual spaces, unrestricted by a corporeal form, creating a new version of self is relatively easy (Kim et al., 2011).

These extracts are representative of the focus group data, and it is noticeable by its absence that there is no indication of a desire to create alternate versions of self in the MMOs played. Given the data from the first study, this seems unlikely and would indicate perhaps the development of a group norm with the focus group, resulting in those individuals who did play around with their version of self were less inclined to 'speak up'. This is speculation of course, but might account for the lack of any contrary evidence. However, these findings do concur with existing research, which has found replication of the existing self, with various virtual spaces showing this tendency, including website (Weibel et al., 2010), blogs, (Herring et al., 2004), SNS (Back et al., 2010; Lampe et al., 2008), SL (Linares et al., 2011) and MMOs (Ducheneaut et al., 2009).

First Character

The first character can often be a seminal point in the presentation of self in a MMO (Wang et al., 2009), as Rowena's extract indicates:

> **Rowena:** *I love character creation! I spent a lot of time on her [her first character]. Her name is a play on how I spell my own name [identifying information removed]. So, I felt very connected to how this character was going to represent me in this new virtual world I was going to be exploring…I also spent a great deal of time tweaking Tigger's appearance. The tattoo was very important. I chose the long flowing hair since my hair was below my waist at that time. I chose purple because there was no red hair option. Other than changing her hairstyle to the one with the loose braid in back, her look has not changed any in the three years since.*
>
> *I think the amount of time I spent (easily a couple of hours!) in creating her reflects my own personality more than any of the others I have created since. And I've created quite a few, but those are stories for another post. I have never gotten tired of this character. More than any other toon I will ever create, in any game, this one is truly my own avatar…She is my avatar; therefore she represents me.*

The first noticeable point from this account is that Rowena spent a considerable period of time creating her character (Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009; Turkay & Adinolf, 2010), and chose to replicate her physical attributes in the game – creating an avatar whose hair as closely replicated hers as possible. This brings to mind the idea of the *bricoleur*, using whatever materials are to hand to create a version of self, and again highlights the role of hair as being important in the physical presentation of self (Ducheneaut et al., 2009). Moreover, having achieved a desired look, Rowena has not changed the look of her first character at all, reinforcing the importance of having that control over the avatar (Bailey et al., 2009; Schroeder, 2002). This is reinforced by the statement that 'she is my avatar; therefore she represents me' – a statement that places the character squarely in the role of presenting an actual version of self (Higgins, 1987), and also as central in the role of being the agent of action concerning the self memory system (Conway, 2005).

However, as with Patrick, change can occur and so, in the following quote, it can be seen Bethan altered her presentation of self:

> *Bethan: My very first character, my main was slightly like me. I created the length and color of her hair and her pale skin just like mine. Other than that, she just is. She was my first toon, and it was my first ever MMO, so I tried to make my character like myself, creating a character that was "different" was a weird concept to me. However, since it has been more than 2 years now, I have created many other toons, most notably Draenei and Night Elves who certainly look nothing like me with their bluish skin and pigtails, and the long ears and long purple hair. I have since learned it is perfectly okay to have a toon that does not correlate to myself in real life. Hope that made sense.*

Bethan's original instinct was to replicate her offline version of self, with her first character drawing upon the 'template' idea addressed in the previous concept. Similar to Higgins's (1987) idea of the 'Actual' self, Bethan attempted to create a character as similar to her offline self as possible, where the online self is an extension of that in real life. It would appear that at the start of her MMO gaming career, the presentation of self that she could envisage were strictly limited to that which she already knew. However, with time, that barrier has been removed and she has created more fantastical characters. Additionally, there was an implication that Bethan presented a version of self that was mediated by a moral code as to what was acceptable behaviour. In effect, Bethan started gaming from a point that precluded any inferred 'deception', despite evidence showing that many people manipulate their avatars for a number of reasons, including trying out new versions of self (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). It is only through playing the game that she has broadened this perspective and redefined the acceptable version of self that can be presented. This conclusion is reinforced by a further quote by Bethan:

> *Bethan: Well, it is sort of hard to explain but the thought of playing a game, in a virtual reality, with foreign surroundings and bizzare characters seemed weird to me. A human was obviously the character most like me and kind of helped me ease into playing an MMO…I just think that perhaps for those playing an MMO for the first time, creating a human is the most identifiable character and for myself it just felt natural to create her to look like myself as much as I could anyway.*

Bethan took refuge in a 'known' template where being human was the default setting (O'Brien, 1999), clearly indicating that her initial concept of a 'character' was driven by her existing schemas and knowledge concerning such virtual environments (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987; Conway & Rubin, 1993); it was only through being exposed to schema incongruent information that she was able to expand to more bizarre variations of presenting her self (Hastie, 1981).

4.3.2 Emotionality

Emotions can both influence, and be influenced by MMOs, so making them powerful means of altering mood. As the following sequence of extracts show, members of the focus group were strongly influenced by their offline mood when playing their chosen MMO:

Mila: *For me when I am in an angry/frustrated/otherwise less than stellar mood, every little thing will (and usually does) annoy the heck out of me. Also, I am much more easily flustered, distracted, and thrown off stride. These are NOT good things when playing a healer (or a tank) where you need to be on top of things, and not prone to distractions. At these times, I am much better at just pure DPS, where a moment of annoyance/distraction/flustering does not usually make or break the outcome for the party.*

Sarah: *Hehe - I can understand Mila…When the day has been rotten, I will not tank or heal either, but do dps and be done with it.*

Rowena: *zomg, people who understand how i play! I keep refering to my 'closet full of dolls' that MMO's have become for me...and that truly is how I play them. Just like Mila and Sarah said, which ones I play depends on the mood I'm in. Since I am an officer in a raiding guiild, I have a weeknight commitment, but on the weekends I can choose to do whatever. That's when I pull out a non-main 'doll'.*

Christina: *hmmm.. i think i'm a bit different in that my characters don't really reflect a specific mood i'm in. Sometimes, i'm in the mood to play on character over another, but it's not that a said mood reflect a said character. i don't know if it's that it's a temperment mood so much as a "i feel like dpsing for a change" kind of mood (which is actually quite rare).*

An interesting sequence of extracts, showing both agreement and disagreement within the group, it illustrates the impact of the offline world in influencing MMO play. As such, it is important to recognise that whilst the presentation of self can be an important motivator for engaging in virtual spaces (Bargh et al., 2002; Nakamura, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2008), that many different situational factors may have an impact on this process. For Sarah, Mila, and Rowena, the chosen presentation of self is dependent on the offline emotional state; for the latter two there is the additional aspect of social referencing, where the perceived reception of their actions is also influencing their decision – namely that they do not wish to play badly when in a key role of healing or tanking. The issue here is that having had a performance of competent healer / tank accepted by their chosen audience, risking that recognition is not seen as cogent. In effect, Mila and Rowena engage in a risk-reward analysis, where the risk of playing a character badly is weighed against the reward of playing a preferred character.

In this case, the self, both as structure and process can be seen in play; first, Mila and Rowena are drawing upon their self memory system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000) to weigh up their options where the primary aim is in not ruining a pre-existing role (Goffman, 1961) that they have already established. As part of the role of being a 'healer' or 'tank' it is necessary that the player co-ordinates with other players, chooses the appropriate action at the right time, and generally is alert to the situation in hand, together with the symbols pertaining to that role (i.e. the appropriate armour). If they were to play badly then the audience might start to question their ability to hold that role, and thereby question their overall presentation of self. As such, Mila and Rowena have made a reasoned choice, whereby they seek to promote themselves as being competent in the role (Jones & Pittman, 1982), not through actively and successfully repeating it ad nauseam, but by refraining from engaging in flawed performance that would negate the accepted performance. Finally, and in contrast to the other group members in this discussion, Christina said that she wasn't swayed by the potential wrath of the audience and, it is suggested could potentially be driven more by internal measures of competence.

Losing a Character

The loss of a character was mentioned by a number of players as an event that would be emotionally upsetting although, as will be seen, there were varying reasons behind their discomfort. For Bethan, the loss of a character would be upsetting for a number of reasons:

> **Bethan**: *Losing either of my two 80's* [high level characters] *would be devastating for me. My main mage moreso than my alt shammy. My main represents my discovery of WoW, as well as my very first looks at different things and places in the game. Not to mention the time invested in her. She has more than 100 mounts, more than 100 pets, tons of rare chanting and tailoring recipes, great gear and over 8500 achievement points. Losing her would probably make me lose all of my interest in the game, as SHE is my focus in WoW.*

It is clear from the language in Bethan's first sentence, that she has a strong emotional investment in her character. This is apparent in her reference to the character being a vehicle for her exploration of the game world, as a point of contact for first experiences; however, there is also a more prosaic reason for her distress – in the significant amount of time that has been invested in the character. To the lay observer her recitation of game figures may lose impact, but an experienced gamer such as myself, this would indicate at least half a year's worth of real time playing the game. It is unsurprising therefore that the character's loss would be of such significance, with Livingston et al. (2014) also finding that players values their characters based on the time and energy invested in them. Indeed, other members of the focus group were in agreement, Christina said that "*i think that would cause me to take a break from wow...at least for a bit. 4 years invested into characters is not something i want to see taken away from me*", with Sarah agreeing that "*What I would hate most is to lose all the effort that has gone into equiping the character, again, especially the main…so much time and dedication have flown into the character that it would be hard to lose.*" In some respect, it is surprising that more members of the focus group were not upset by the loss of a means of expressing the self, but it may be that the presentation of self registers less as something to be lost, since it is an act that is engaged in at every moment in time. In effect, the self (either the offline or online one) cannot be lost, since it is ethereal and, in some senses, does not exist as tied to any one point in time or space. This is not to say that roles cannot exist for those moments, but

given the concept of a continuous version of self, whether in the autobiographical memory of the individual, or the mind of the audience, then there is no possibility of loss.

For Kevin, there was acknowledgement of the impact of losing a character, but he was phlegmatic in his opinion:

> **Kevin**: *Having my character deleted would be a massive inconvenience, since I'd have to re-level and re-gear him. I wouldn't really see it as a loss though, since I'd be able to get him back to his old self eventually, except for some achievements and items that I wouldn't lose any sleep over.*
>
> *The only way he could really be killed is if the race/class is removed from the game, or the game dies and they turn off the servers. Both of those would be painful. I'm hoping I lose interest in WoW before that happens.*

Kevin acknowledges the time it would take to re-level the character but there is a sense of the character loss not being permanent – something not acknowledged by the previous group members. As he says, it is only via the servers being shut down that character loss would be absolutely permanent – potentially providing another reason why the loss of the ability to express the self is not more frequently expressed. This is mirrored by Hanna who said that "*I would hate to loose my Warhammer Zealot. I would have no problem remaking her avatar as someone else mentioned* [Kevin]*, but I can never get back the hours and hours I have spend leveling her PvP rank and obtaining hard to get gear.*"

It would seem then that the loss of a character, whilst being an emotionally disturbing event, is not directly tied to the loss of the ability to present a version of self – mainly because character loss is invariably not permanent and would not impair the presentation anyway.

Character aesthetics

In the previous study, how a character looked was found to be highly important to players, in line with previous research (Schroeder, 2002), with long periods being spent customizing avatars (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Turkay & Adinolf, 2010). The

results were replicated in the focus group study, as the following extract from Christina illustrated:

> **Christina**: *What my character looks like is definitely important to me. I get really excited when my gear matches, and it looks how i like it. My priest looks really good right now, i won't lie =P…Now…why do i like it so much? I don't know…a lot of wow is about aesthetics i think. Why else do enchants make our weapons all glowy and pretty? The glow doesn't help at all. It's a video game - we want things to look cool. I want my characters to look cool, to myself, and probably to a certain extent to others. For example, i love my zul'aman bear mount. Why? Partly because it's one of the coolest looking land mounts imo, and partly epeen. It's a rarer mount (well…relatively) and people know that.*

The first impression when reading Christina's extract is the sheer emotional excitement that she experiences as a product of her character looking good, supporting research suggesting that the ability to choose the avatar is important (Bryant & Akerman, 2009), and that people like to be able to control its appearance (Schroeder, 2002). As she also outlines, whilst an enchantment on a weapon (i.e. +5 Strength) has its own obvious functionality, the visual effect is irrelevant in terms of game mechanics. But the idea of something being 'cool' is relevant here, whether referencing an internal measure (of coolness), or an external one. Born out of reference to whatever the individual deems as 'cool' (via the autobiographical memory, Pillemer, 1992)) it will be enacted as part of the presentation of a particular form of self. This process is not one dimensional – whilst Christina is right that the graphics of an enchant have no effect on the game mechanics, they do indicate to other players the status of the character (and therefore maybe the player as well). The enchant, and the coolness of the avatar act are the 'front' of the performance (Goffman, 1959), where there is a triadic relationship between the goals of self memory system (Conway, 2005), concepts of 'coolness' as understood by the client – both internally and externally referenced, and the relationship with the audience.

Such similar sentiments are echoed by Hanna, who said "*I do not show my Warlord helm. It looks strange to me and doesnt seem to match the rest of the warlord gear on the zealot. Plus it looks like I have a frying pan on my face. Not cool!*" As before, there is reference to the idea of coolness that ties together emotional significance and socially mandated elements of the

situation. There is another key element to this extract however, which is also related to Patrick's quote – that of experiential merger (Klimmt et al., 2010). It is significant that Hanna refers to 'my Warlord Helm' and 'having a frying pan on my face. Not cool!', in using language in such a manner, it is clear that she has identified with the character to the extent that she has taken on its attributes. It is not *the character* that she doesn't want to look uncool, it's *her* – her in the virtual world. Of course, there is a possible interpretation that she doesn't want her character, as her avatar, to look bad in front of other people, but since she doesn't directly refer to other players, it seems that the first interpretation is more likely. This conclusion also supports the work of Belk (2013) who argued that whilst early use of virtual environments was characterised by the adoption on a variety of physical forms (Turkle, 1995), as the capacity of graphics cards improved, users have become re-embodied. This can be seen in websites (Schmitt et al., 2008; Weibel et al., 2010), SNS (Boudreau, 2013), SL (Linares et al., 2011; O'Brien, 1999), and MMOs (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Lin & Wang, 2014; Wang et al., 2009). It is the physical image that defines the self that other players interact with evidence from SNS arguing that pictures are both a good way to express the self (Suler, 2008), and can be actively used to create the desired version of self (Binder et al., 2009; Dorethy et al., 2014).

However, even for those players that do not engage in experiential transfer, there can be emotional links to a character, with Kevin remarking that "*When Blizzard added the barbershops recently, I got him some hair to unlock the achievement, and then changed him back to normal. Even though he only had hair for a few seconds, I felt weirdly guilty for messing him about. :).*" Similarly, Alia mentioned that "*I have two orcs and they look pretty similar - I created their look based on what I like in RL…I have tarted around with their hair in the same way Kevin did - for the achievement and then put it back to how it was originally.*" Both players experienced guilt at altering the features of their character, despite the obvious fact that they are entitled to do so. Indeed, there is no suggestion from either player that their guilt has been brought on by potentially confusing other games, or because the continuity of the presentation of self has been compromised (see Bluck & Alea, 2002), but almost that the character had been changed without its permission. In effect, the character had achieved some level of independence or presence within the game that was independent of the player.

In keeping with the idea of looking cool is the desire to stand out from the crowd, as documented by Ducheneaut et al. (2009), with Mila commenting as follows:

> **Mila:** *Presence for my characters comes from any *distinguishing* apparel they may have (be that tier gear in WoW, or interesting custom colors in GW, of just unusual combinations of items that make them stand out) plus any attitude I give them that makes them stand out. Usually for me, thats a bit of approriate humor/irony to break the ice in PUGs. I don't think any would have presense if we did not *give* it to them.*

Related to the concept of 'coolness', is the idea of players wanting to 'stand out' – an idea that ostensibly more outward looking than the former category. From Mila's extract it can be surmised that she wished to tell something to other players; through the use of tiered items, custom colours or unusual item combinations, she wanted to portray herself as different – as not being a standard player who could be ignored. Her words clearly indicate that this was a specific intention on her part, possibly as a product of, and desire to appear more autonomous (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Interestingly however, and in comparison to Hanna, Mila's talk of the character being given presence would seem to indicate that she does not experience experiential merger (Klimmt et al., 2009) – the character is quite separate from her and merely a vehicle for the presentation of self that, as she said, is imbued by her with presence in the game world. The concept of wanting to stand out is not unique, for as Sarah said *"As to looks - I tend to chose something that sticks out by being not completely good-looking…the male Tauren twink has a broken horn. I spend some time to make their look fit, so that it presents a harmonious whole."* For Sarah, there is the desire not to confirm to the usual standards of 'beauty' within the game environment and so stand out by being "off-kilter", something that was been noted in research as a motivation to play MMOs (Fron et al., 2007); it is also acknowledged that Sarah did want the character's aesthetics to co-ordinate – maybe indicating a desire to stand out, but without going too far from the socially accepted metrics of beauty. As already noted, players like to have control of their avatar (Schroeder, 2002), but this does not negate social influences from such manipulations. This is to be expected however, as Rowena explained:

> **Rowena:** *I think aesthetics are a huge part of the game. Especially in such a social genre. Humans are designed to be that way =) We're social, and we're sight-oriented mammals, who rely on visual cues to know how to respond appropriately to other humans. So, having an attractive avatar is important to me.*

MMOs are indeed social virtual spaces and, as Rowena said, humans do use vision as the primary source of acquiring information (Dunn & Stacey, 2010). However, Rowena's desire to have an attractive avatar is representative of her specific goals, and cannot necessarily be generalised, such that not all players wish to have attractive avatars; nonetheless, it is clear from these extracts and from those from Study one that the aesthetics of a character represents a key point in the presentation of self. By tying together the active representation of goals of the self memory system (Conway, 2005), emotional attachment to a character (Livingston et al., 2014), and the front (Goffman, 1959) by which players interact with other games, the look of a character is a critical part of the presentation of self in MMOs.

4.3.3 Social Interaction

Social interaction is, in many ways, absolutely integral to the presentation of self – not only within MMOs, but in all avenues of human life. However, to all intents and purposes, there is no difference in symbolic terms between the real and virtual environments in this respect, since the communicative function of the autobiographical memory (Pillemer, 1992) already holds the audience as part of the schematic constructs. As Goffman (1959) argued, there is no need for the 'generalised other' (Mead, 1934) to be present for interaction to occur, since a conceptual image can be created for them. Whilst the nature of the virtual spaces and the affordances they provide *can* provide variation above and beyond that provided by the real world, there are also similarities as indicated by Clare when she said that "*You can find friends in MMOs and the friendship can hold even when we would all stop playing. But like in RL there are people i pass by and say "omg, hopefully never again" and others i come along with.*" So, although there is an inherent difference in the physical presence of the worlds, since both entail the manipulation of symbolic elements (concerning what a 'friend' is, what the goals of the interaction are, etc.) the outcomes are essentially the same. This is well illustrated in the following quote by Bethan:

> **Bethan**: *I see the true friends I have made in WoW as just as important as my RL friends. My few true friends in WoW have my phone number and we text each other when we don't hear from each other after a few days, or if one of us is running late for a raid or whatnot. We*

also chat on vent for much longer and more often than I do to any of my RL friends on the phone. We have also discussed meeting but distance is a huge factor. I am just as close to my WoW friends as my RL friends.

Patrick: *@ Bethan: Do you think your perspective of the game would change if you decided to roll a Horde character?*

Bethan: *I did create a Horde toon about a month ago, she is 75 now and I am just not into her as much as I had hoped…In addition, after 2 years of playing I have developed a whole network of friends, along with my fellow guildies that I have no access to horde side, so it now just seems lonely over there to me.*

For Bethan, social interaction clearly plays a critical part in her gaming and one that is integrated into her offline existence – as she says, given the number of ways in which they can make contact, the relationships are as close as real life friendships. Furthermore, when asked by Patrick about creating a Horde character, Bethan reveals that she had a character but felt lonely playing it without the social structures supporting it. Given that she *could* contact her gaming friends outside of the game itself, this indicates the importance of ongoing social relations within the game, as being essential to the gaming experience. From a dramaturgical perspective, the interaction was other people provides the validation of the self, even when that self is being presented in a very particular frame of reference (Goffman, 1974). In this case, the virtual space acts as the frame for the interaction, such that all actions within that frame are seen as belonging to that strip of activity. However, there is still an impact on the psyche of the player, and it is in the integration of unusual events (Hastie, 1981) within the existing schema that the boundary between the real and the virtual is most fluid. Other members of the focus group also commented on the impact of friendships on the offline lives, with Mike saying:

Mike: *I started playing the game just for fun. I ended up getting completely immersed in it when I started making friends. I have been to a guild retreat with the friends I have made. A bunch of us met up in Tennessee and went to the big aquarium, to a football game, and finished the weekend off with a big cookout…Friendships are a defining theme in World of Warcraft. Without them I dont think the game would exist anymore. Who would play if everyone hated them and they hated everyone else?*

Similarly, Mila remarked that "*And yes, its the in game friendships that keep me logging in. If everyone I know stops playing, then chances are so will I. MMOs are big lonely places without friends.*" In both of these extracts it is clear that as with emotionality, social interaction is a cornerstone of the MMO experience. For Bethan, Mike, and Mila, the impact of friendships has extended beyond their virtual sense of self, and moved into their offline existence, so further reinforcing those associations. For other players however, the opportunity for social interaction can have even more significant effects:

> **Gemma**: *I'm an extremely shy person, so playing a MMO where you have to chat to people was a big step for me. I started playing WoW more for the leveling and the exploring…I'm even saying something in chat sometimes LOL*

> *I've only started doing dungeons after Blizz established the Random Dungeon Finder because that allows me to find groups without having to actually talk to people. That is a godsend for people like me (and I'm sure there are more like me).*

For Gemma, the anonymity provided by her MMO has allowed her to create a newer, more social version of self. It is not clear whether this new self is an actual or ideal version (Higgins, 1987) or whether this represents a possible self in her offline life (Markus & Ruvolo, 1989), but within the MMO environment at least a new version of self has been created. However, social interaction is not only about the translation of online relations to the offline world, but also pertains to how players interact with each other. Arguably less concerned with the self as a structure, the process of presenting the self when online relates more keenly to the goals for the interaction in the game:.

> **Moderator**: *Christina, what would it mean to you if you had an ugly looking character then?*
> **Christina**: *I do wear the kingslayer title on both my priest and druid I suppose as a way of subtly bragging about my achievements. Prior to that I wore the legionnaire title on my priest, i suppose to subconsciously communicate i'm "oldschool" (i'm self analysing and hypothesizing here.....this isn't definite).*

Tying together a number of concepts already discussed, Christina choose to use two different titles that signified her senior status within the game (the Legionnaire title indicating PvP success, and the Kingslayer one having completed what was, at the time of writing, the toughest fight in the game). In doing so Christina, like Mike using his Justicar title, both wanted to stand out (as previously indicated by Mila and Sarah), and wished to communicate something to the other players – that she was more than competent in her ability to play the game (Jones & Pittman, 1982). In doing this, she is letting other players know that any declarations she might make for expertise in the game can be substantiated by previous events and in effect, her claims are irrefutable. Conversely, some players have no desire to promote their expertise, but are driven by other goals:

> **William**: *Character creation for me is important because I am always searching for a way to make my toon stand out. My favorite character creator is for City of Heroes, it has the most options and you can really make something unique and memorable if you take the time. I make a lot of my City of Hero toons with the intent to make other players laugh. I have an indestructible giant pink teddy bear named "Loving Hearts Bear" that gets kudos on his costume every time i join a new party. I juist wanna make the other players smile.*

As with other players, William does evidence a desire to stand out from the crowd (Ducheneaut et al., 2009), but unlike Christina who wants to emphasise her expertise, Williams is motivated by a desire to make people laugh or, as Jones and Pittman (1982) might argue, to ingratiate himself to the audience. Furthermore, there is not a one-off event, but it would has occurred many times, with care and attention being put into the process with a clearly defined goal (Leary & Kowalski, 1990). For all of these players then, the act of social interaction has repercussions, not simply on the self as being a process or a performance (although it undeniably is), but on the self as a structure, where the self-schemas (Markus, 1977) and autobiographical memory (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987; Conway & Rubin, 1993) are altered to account for the new experiences.

4.3.4 Motivations

Escape

In the previous sections it has been identified that there are a number of motivations for playing a MMO, not least the desire to present a certain version of self to other players. However, one motivation briefly explored in Study One was that of temporarily escaping the offline world, and using the MMO as a respite. In the focus group, there was agreement amongst some members that this was of value:

> **Mike**: *For sure, without a doubt, I play this game to escape real life. I immerse myself in a completely made up world and just get in a zone where I don't even want to be bothered by a phone call. It's a way to get away from work, people IRL who bug you, or even when there it's raining outside and there isn't anything good on TV and you haven't bought a good book recently.*

Reading Mike's extract, there is a feeling of liberation in his playing a game, and the feeling of escape from everyday worries; more than this though, there is the sense of disappearing into the game, with the word 'immerse' suggesting a desire to disconnect himself from the world, if only temporarily. In this respect, Mike is also stepping outside of the bounds of his offline presentation of self so that even if he does not wish to be something new in the virtual space, he is freed of the obligations tied to his old version of self. In doing this, Mike is effectively subverting the role of his standard offline self and taking on the mantle of a possible self (Markus, 1977) which, in its presentation, does not have to take into account his standard offline existence. This can also be seen in the following extract by Patrick who said "*The game is escapism for me, but more in the sense that I can just let my RL worries be put on hold for even just a few minutes.*" In playing the game, Patrick (and Mike) are able to set aside their offline version of self and temporarily take on a different and arguably less complicated version of self. In some respects it might be argued that there is a compartmentalisation of self-knowledge (Showers, 1992; Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2007), in that they are drawing upon a different version of their social selves, and one that is likely quite distinct from that of their offline versions.

However, this is not the case with all players, as Bethan illustrated, saying "*I think for myself, WoW is just an escapism into a virtual world, as I don't really play to escape from anything in RL. Just a hobby really, a very time consuming one that I enjoy a great deal.*" Whilst there are similarities between Bethan, Mike, and Patrick in the classification of their gaming as escape (as also noted by Frostling-Henningson, 2009), Bethan makes it clear that she is not trying to escape anything in real life *per se* – it is merely general escapism that, as she says, could be easily classified as a hobby. For her, there is no attempt to create an alternate version of self, distinct from her offline existence and her escapism was, in a sense, passive.

This distinction underpins a more nuanced understanding of Escapism, since an understanding of the desire to escape is mediated by the intention behind the action. For Mila, there is a clear psychological reason for her gaming, when explaining why she played MMOs – "*Definitely escapism. Life is full of stresses, and since I am an introvert, I much prefer to recharge my batteries in the comfort of my home. Plus it helps knowing that the game ones you can walk away from at any time :).*" Mila's intention in gaming is to relax and, as she said, 'recharge my batteries' – an action that is, ironically, indicative of a more active style of escapism; in a similar vein to Mike, this appeared to be based on the desire to spend time alone, again reinforcing the idea of MMOs as being a place outside of the normal sphere of daily functioning or, as has been termed, a 'third place' (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) that is unaffected by either home or work reassures so allowing for a more naturalistic expression of self. However, not all players view MMO in this way, as Rowena indicated:

> **Rowena:** *Alex, I guess the ability to 'ability to walk away' is inherent in any leisure activity, but I really think that 1. the whole 'anonymity of the internet' thing is self-deception; and 2. 'real-life vs. game-life' is a false dichotomy…game life *is* real life. We are real people sitting at real keyboards and monitors sharing a series of activities. We talk to each other on vent. Some of you may even have webcams going. Those activities take up our time, our psyches, and our money.*

Tying in with Mila's quote, Rowena would appear not to agree with her, arguing instead that virtual spaces are no different from 'real' spaces, and so that you cannot 'walk away from it' (the virtual world) any more than one might walk away from real

life. For Rowena, her motivation to use MMOs is explicitly tied in with her conceptualisation of the affordances provided by those spaces - virtual spaces are not seen as unique, so precluding the possibility of those spaces being seen as different, or capable of supporting a different version of self.

4.3.5 Nature of MMOs

As indicted in the last section, how the players conceptualises the virtual space (whether that be a MMO, SL, or SNS, etc.) will have an impact on how they interact with it. If no difference is seen between the online and offline worlds, then it is suggested that the individual is less likely to identify the space, and the affordances it provides, as a place to think, feel, or act any differently than before. In the following quotes, Kevin and Christina discuss the permanence of MMO characters:

> **Kevin**: *As far as I'm concerned, the only difference between a max-level character that's five years old, and one that's five weeks old, is that the five year old character has a bank full of obsolete junk. All the good memories I have from WoW are stored inside my head, the character knows nothing…A WoW character is a digital construct made from a limited set of rudimentary building blocks. It's trivial to make a new one, identical to the old one, and apart from the loss of some obsolete gear and some rare mounts, it would be the same character to me. He only comes alive when injected with my personality and imagination, and his only memories are my memories. Those things are safe from deletion.*
>
> *I'm not saying the character's personality doesn't deviate from my own. I have never set fire to an orphan, not even accidentally. I have created a personality for my character and it is important to me, but it doesn't exist anywhere outside my head. The character can't be deleted from WoW as long as the means to create an identical avatar for it still exists.*
>
> **Christina**: *Perhaps I'm sentimental, but rerolling the same character doesn't feel the same.*
>
> **Kevin**: *We're all just playing with dolls, really. And not unique, hand-stitched antique dolls that can never be replaced. We're using Barbies.*
>
> **Christina**: *i hated barbies. i was very particular about my polly pockets though. =P but ya, it seems apparent we have differing levels of emotional attachment to our characters =P*

This extract conveys the essence of the discussion concerning the nature of MMOs – it does not relate to the affordances virtual spaces provide or whether the players sees the online space as being different to the offline one, but the degree to which the player sees the space as unique, and separate from their own psyche. For Kevin, it is clear that his character is merely a place-holder for his own experiences, and that the avatar is effectively a 'shell' – bereft of presence. There is no possibility of experiential transfer (Klimmt et al., 2009; Klimmt et al., 2010) because it is Kevin who is experiencing the game – even though the personality of the game character is marginally different to his own. His character is a possession (Fron et al., 2007; Wong et al., 2009), and easily replaceable. In contrast to this, Christina is clearly more emotionally attached to her character but tellingly, could not see an exact replica as being the same. In this situation, the character has achieved presence beyond its existence as a construct of the player – in effect it has in some degree become independent of its creator; as such, is neither an avatar nor an independent being, but exists in an 'other' space – dependent on the player to act, but independent in its existence.

A cursory explanation for this is that the avatar is indeed independent of the player since once created it exists (albeit in a dormant state) on the servers of the game company and, technically, it belongs to them. However, this interpretation does not adequately explain the emotional element of Christina's reaction, or the sense of presence a character can achieve. An explanation can be found in the player's relationship with the fundamental nature of MMOs, for if the player does not see any difference between the online and offline spaces, or sees the avatar only as a placeholder for their own self-concept, then the avatar will never be separate from the player. However, if there is a difference, and the character is seen as being a vessel for a different version of self, or having some part in the played experiences, then it is more likely that it will be seen as independent.

Interactive Immersion

As indicated, the players understanding of the virtual space influences how they interact with it, with the degree of immersion within the game being one facet of that interactivity. As Sarah identified, MMOs have qualities beyond other traditional forms of entertainment:

> *Sarah: What is so appealing in WoW - you can do it for ten minutes or five hours, you do not need to leave the house or get dressed or need to clean away things afterwards. It takes you mind of a lot of things that happened and which you should not take into your evening. A good book, nice movie can do the same. A night out with friends as well, though it needs more preparation (arranging dates, getting there and back...)*
>
> *There is usually always something interesting going on ingame, but you are always free to participate or not (as opposed to e.g. plaing in a soccer team as a hobby). So it is complete freedom.*

For Sarah, it is the ability to choose her level of interaction in the game that makes MMOs so compelling – as she said, she doesn't have to leave home, or make complicated plans to meet people, and there is the choice to engage as little or as much as she might prefer. These themes are also reflected in Rowena's words:

> *Rowena: I definitely use the game as an escape, in the same way I've used books, television, and just about any other activity that kept me from thinking about unpleasant things in my free time. This particular form of escapism is particularly rewarding because it is so interactive. It's creative, yet mundane in the same way that crafting a woodworking project might be...a certain amount of planning, then a certain amount of following set rules, zen-like moments of physically handling the wood, etc…it's interactive entertainment. When I started playing WoW, I was spendinig every evening in front of the TV. I was horribly depressed, and the one-way entertainment certainly didn't help. As Karin mentioned, MMO's are something you can do without leaving home, and it engrosses you as well. My other hobbies like painting, reading, etc., are 'singular' in that no one else participates in them, I do them alone. But MMO's are as singular or social as you choose to fit your mood.*

Even more so than for Sarah, Rowena's use of the game has had a marked impact upon her life, with the MMO potentially having helped in alleviating her depression. As she indicated, it is the flexibility of choice in the experience, expressed by the level of interactive immersion, which really defines MMOs as being different to other virtual spaces. As indicated at the end of chapter Two, MMO have a series of characteristics (e.g. graphical character-driven interface, quests, role types, etc.) that are

more likely to draw the player into the game, in a way that books, TV, or films are unlikely to do; in so doing, the immersive nature of the space is created through the interplay between the psychological and environmental elements (Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Stein & Markus, 1996). In contrast to watching TV or reading a book, the player is in control of the action in the game (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010), can control the look of the character so aiding in immersion (Christou, 2014; Dindar & Akbulut, 2014; Taylor, 2003; Warburton, 2009), and can do things that are impossible in real life (Boellstorff, 2008). Given these attributes, it is unsurprising that MMOs can be experienced as unique virtual spaces that have the inherent flexibility to enable most desired player behaviours.

4.4 Overview of the Theoretical Structure

The primary aim of study two was to verify and expand the model of presentation of self in MMO that was developed in study one, with a secondary aim of exploring the topic from a group perspective.

During the course of the focus group, a number of topics were discussed including the self being used as a template for character creation, how the loss of a character might affect a player, social interaction, and interactive immersion. Most of these topics existed in the study one model, and were reinforcing existing concepts; Interactive Immersion was a new concept however, and is the sole addition to the model as a product of study two. Given the similarities in the studies one and two models, the study two model is not presented here, but can be found in appendix X.

The full qualitative theoretical model has one central core category – Presentation of the Online Gaming self and it is the conceptual category which ties together the five main concepts of Elements of self, Social Interaction, Motivations, Emotionality and Nature of MMOs. The presentation of self in MMOs can be best explained with reference to these concepts although it must be remembered that no one player will necessarily refer to each idea in the same way. That is, some players will find greater power in the ability to present a version of self through their First Characters, whilst others might find Social Referencing to be more potent. Each player is likely to reference each concept to *some* degree however. Within each of the main concepts there

are a number of sub-concepts which theoretically relate to the main heading, each of which has been addressed in Chapters Three and Four.

4.5 Discussion

This chapter has elaborated the model developed from the analysis of the interview data that occurred in study one and in doing so has added another concept to the category Nature of MMOs. It has sought to explain the presentation of self in MMOs in such a way that clarifies the nature of the self – both as a structure, and as a process; that is, that the self can be conceived as having structural elements such as self-schemata (Markus, 1977; Thomas et al., 2013) which are embodied in the Self Memory System (Conway, 2005; Williams et al., 2007), but that presenting a version of self is a process, reliant on interaction with the 'generalised other' (Mead, 1934) through a variety of self-presentation techniques (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980; Gibson & Sachau, 2000), so that the goals of the working memory might be achieved.

The focus group members generally sought to replicate their offline version of self, so imitating a certain cohort of the study one participants; this supported literature looking at other virtual spaces which had concluded that people produce accurate versions of their offline self (SL - Aas et al., 2010; SNS - Back et al., 2010; Blogs - Herring et al., 2004), with people in Second Life generally using human avatars (Linares et al., 2011), due to replicating the corporeal form they are used to (O'Brien, 1999). There was evidence of some of the group members wanting to stand out visually from the crowd, in keeping with findings by Ducheneaut et al. (2009), with the concept of 'coolness' as being particularly prominent.

The category of emotionality was detailed more clearly, with the analysis suggesting that the loss of a character would be a psychologically painful experience for most players, largely due to the amount of time and effort invested in the characters (Livingston et al., 2014). This was not the case for all group members however, with Kevin indicating that the loss of a character would be inconsequently, since it could be replaced. This also tied into his perception of the nature of MMOs, prompting the suggestion that since he saw his character as effectively hollow, then whilst the shell of the character might be lost, the content would not since that he in his mind. As was shown in study one, the participants had strong emotional connections to the aesthetic

look of their characters, with many comments being made concerning the desire to look cool, or for the character to look attractive (Turkay & Adinolf, 2010). This was exhibited both in the idea of coolness, and in want to stand out.

It is no surprise that coolness and wanting to stand out had elements of social interaction within them, since both reference playing to an audience (Bryant & Akerman, 2009). Indeed, such was the potency of social interaction that it was the primary reason for playing the game for many of the participants; it was clear that the schema for their selves was strongly linked to concepts of other players, with a strong emotional component associated with it. Part of the structural elements of the self, the social self was entwined with concepts of the individual self (Bluck et al., 2005). However, there were indications of a more ostentatious side of social interaction, with reference to participants wanting other players to know their gaming skills – against referring back to the concept of wanting to stand out.

One concept that was elaborated upon in the study was the concept of escape from the offline world as being a motivating factor (Demetrovics et al., 2011). There was a distinction between escape being passive (identified by a desire to play the game for its own right), or active (characterised by the game being played to get away from daily life for a while). In whatever form, this concurred with existing research that indicated the importance of escapism as a gaming motivation (Yee, 2006b).

The last category introduced the new concept of Interactive Immersion, with several participants indicating that the nature of the game environment itself facilitated immersion. A product of the re-embodiment within the MMO via the avatar, the ability to immerse in the game was seen as indicative of the freedom that could be experienced in MMOs.

4.5.1 Study Reflexivity

The primary aim of the study two was to expand on the model developed in study one, with the secondary aim of exploring any group perspectives that might arise. In this respect the Study was a success, given that new material extended the existing work. However, it is acknowledged that 'group' aspect of focus groups was not well utilised although it was an effective development of the interview protocol used in study

one. In addition, given the quantitative nature of Study Three, it acted as a successful bridge in opening up the research questions to a larger group of people.

However, the main problem was insufficient interaction between the participants, although there were several moments of brief discussion between group members. The limited interaction was all the more surprising given that all participants knew what the research was about, had expressed a willingness to take part, and agreed to abide by the rules of conduct for the group. This is a problem particular to online asynchronous focus groups, since the usual means of engaging participants in an offline conversation are subverted – not least by not knowing if the participants were even reading the comments. As noted by Oringderff (2004) agreeing to participate in a focus group does not guarantee turning up, or taking part.

Only 13 out of 27 participants of the asynchronous focus group actively took part; although this did not represent an ethical problem, since all members of the group had agreed to abide by the ethical protocols, it is accepted that it might have had a detrimental effect. Aside from encouraging all group members to take part, another possible route would have been to have removed non-participating group members. However, this course was not chosen for a number of reasons – first, the active group members did not complain about the inactive ones. Second, whilst removal from the group could have been justified for offensive behaviour, no provision was made for removal on grounds of inactivity. Third, and with a view to gaining more data, it was hoped that the inactive participants would find a particular concept sufficiently interesting as to join in. For these reasons the inactive participants were allowed to stay in the group.

Overall though, this is an issue for any asynchronous virtual method and indeed, the same effect can be achieved in offline groups by participant losing focus and daydreaming (Hughes & Lang, 2004). It is anticipated that the most potent predictor of engagement in such situations would be commitment to the research process and topic in hand.

It is also acknowledged that I may have played a role in the limited success of the group aspect of the asynchronous group, at least in the latter stages of the group's existence. As Fern (2001) said, the role of the researcher in the focus group is to act as a moderator between the group members. However, given that the asynchronous focus group failed to reach a 'critical mass' of interaction whereby group members

spontaneously referenced each other's posts on a regular basis, my role changed from one of 'the moderator' to 'the interviewer'. This was characterised by my asking questions of group members in order to clarify points, but with limited ability to stimulate the group discussion.

One way of removing this problem would have been to have had offline synchronous focus groups. Whilst researchers such as Brüggen and Willems (2009), Underhill and Olmsted (2003), and Chase and Alvarez (2000) have argued convincingly for the benefits of online focus groups, it is acknowledged that offline groups have their own advantages. Due to the physical proximity, it is possible to directly ask questions of quieter members, and to stimulate discussions by comparing positions in a discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Perhaps most importantly, it is easier for group members to engage with each other and actively discuss the topic in hand through direct and real world interaction (Brüggen & Willems, 2009).

Finally, an unanticipated problem occurred for the asynchronous group, with respect to the use of Facebook at a space to hold the focus groups. The terms and conditions of Facebook stipulate that whilst users *own* whatever material is uploaded onto the website, Facebook has the right to *use* it however they see fit. This is a set of terms and conditions which all Facebook users subscribe to when they create an account on Facebook, and as such all participants to the group should have been aware of this. However, it is acknowledged that I, as the researcher, should have reminded prospective participants of this before they consented to take part in the group. As such, whilst this did not compromise the integrity of the data in terms of *subsequent* anonymisation, or in terms of group confidentiality, in future research an asynchronous focus group would be enacted with some changes.

As Hutton and Henderson (2013, p.90) acknowledged, "ethical concerns in SNS research are a controversial topic" with issues such as whether ethics approval is required for the collection of SNS being considered. Interestingly, it would appear that this issue of Facebook terms and conditions has not been picked up by existing research. In his paper on a piece of Harvard research, Zimmer (2010) addressed issues of consent, strategies for anonymisation of data, and respecting expectations of privacy – however he did not mention the issue of Facebook's potential use of the referenced data. George, Dellasega, Whitehead, and Bordon (2013) reported on a pilot study using Facebook to host a stress management resource which included the uploading of

personal video-narratives, but again there was no reference to Facebook terms and conditions. Similarly, Napolitano, Hayes, Bennett, Ives, and Foster (2013) compared ways of delivering weight loss programme content to overweight students. Two of the three methods included membership of a Facebook group, where the students were able to interact. As with the George et al. (2013) study, in the article there was no reference to the fact that under the current Facebook terms and conditions, Facebook would be to use whatever information was provided there. Finally, Cavallo et al. (2012) reported on a study which used a Facebook group to facilitate physical activity interventions – again, there was no reference to the Facebook terms and conditions with respect to contributions made by the group members.

As indicated by these articles, the ethics of social networking sites such as Facebook are still being negotiated; this does not exonerate me from not reminding the focus group participants of the Facebook terms and conditions, but it does indicate that the issue might be termed a 'work in progress'. Whilst research has taken place using Facebook (e.g. Cavallo et al., 2012; George et al., 2013; Napolitano et al., 2013) it is recognised that future research could be more easily completed by the creation of a forum on a secure website.

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter has reported on study two of the thesis, which employed a focus group methodology to gather data on the topic of presentation of self in MMOs. The findings indicated a similar pattern of results to the study one conclusions; an additional concept – Interactive Immersion – was added to the theoretical model as a product of the extra information gathered. Having developed the model to a natural end-point, the fifth chapter of thesis will report upon a quantitative methodology that used an online questionnaire to test the validity, and generalizability, of the theoretical model.

Chapter Five: Study Three

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the third study, a quantitative investigation based on the qualitative model developed through studies one and two. The chapter provides the results of a factor analysis based on the five factor thesis model, with subsequent analyses following as a product of this initial analysis.

5.1.1 Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this study was to test the combined theory of the qualitative studies, to ascertain the accuracy of its constructs as specified below. The secondary aim of the study was to test the qualitative theory against a larger sample to ascertain whether the results can be generalised. It is noted that the theoretical model developed was substantive in nature since it focused on the presentation of self in MMOs alone, not in all virtual environments (Kearney, 1998); however, by examining the 'fit' of the model in other environments, it may be possible to create a formal theory (McCann & Clark, 2003).

5.1.2 Rationale for Study Three

Within any research methodology there can be certain epistemological assumptions made, which can influence the methods used and the interpretation of results found through such methods. In essence these assumptions relate to both the nature of knowledge and whether conclusions are viable within the given methodological framework. However, these assumptions can be restrictive, by allowing researchers to adhere too keenly to the tenets of that particular methodology, to the detriment of other ways of thinking (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Quantitative research can rely too heavily on concepts of confirmation and falsifiability, whilst qualitative research can see subjective research as being the only true definition of 'reality', despite the lack of generalizability.

To address this, Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) advocated the utilisation of mixed methods, which they defined as "the class of research where the researcher mixed or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or languages into a single study" (p.17). Greene, Caracelli and Graham (1989) outlined five mixed methods, with corresponding definitions:

Table 5.0.1: Purposes of Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs

Method	Description
Triangulation	Seeks convergence and corroboration of results from the differing methods
Complementarity	Seeks elaboration and clarification of the results of one study through the results of subsequent studies
Development	Seeks to use the results of one method to inform the second method
Initiation	Seeks to discover contradiction, to reframe the questions of one method with the results of the second method
Expansion	Seeks to expand the breadth and range of inquiry by using different methods for differing study components

Note: Adapted from "Toward a Conceptual Framework for Mixed-Method Evaluation Designs", by J.Greene, V.Caracelli, and W.Graham, 1989, *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11(3), p.259.

Triangulation is the most common type of mixed method employed, with Denzin (2006) arguing that there are four types – triangulation of data, of researchers, of theory, and of methods. There is disagreement concerning its application however, with Greene et al. (1989) argue that if triangulation is employed then the different methods should have different inherent strengths and weaknesses, with simultaneous implementation. Jick (1979) also urged caution, warning that with triangulation replication can be tricky to achieve, particularly if qualitative methods are used.

Utilising the Greene et al. (1989) criteria, this thesis employed a number of mixed method strategies. In order to illustrate this, the three studies of the thesis and the method of analysis used have been provided in Table 5.2:

Table 5.0.2: Overview of Studies in the Thesis

Study	Data Collection Method	Type of Analysis
1	Online one-to-one interviews, and email interviews	Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)
2	Asynchronous Online Focus Groups	Thematic Analysis
3	Online Questionnaire	Factor Analysis (FA)

Triangulation has been employed with respect to the Focus Groups, since the second study has used a different method to corroborate the results of the Interviews conducted in the first study. With respect to the third study, this should not be seen as triangulation since there is not a convergence of results, despite being drawn from the data of Studies one and two. Instead, the third study is best seen as both a Development and Expansion of the previous studies. It is a Development since it is using the data from Studies one and two, and an Expansion because it is expanding the breadth and scope of the original studies.

5.1.3 How Study Three builds upon the work of Studies One and Two

During the course of Studies One and Two, a model was established that sought to clarify the presentation of self in MMOs. The specific concepts of the model to be tested included, but were not exclusive to the Elements of Self, Emotionality, Social Interaction, Motivations, and the Nature of MMOs. Within these Core concepts, there were sub-concepts which provided the questions for the third study. The online questionnaire and subsequent confirmatory factor analysis were based on the concepts and sub-concepts established during the qualitative phase, which created a coherent and logic link between the three studies.

5.2 Research Methodology

5.2.1 Overview of Factor Analysis

In this section, both Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) are discussed because, as will become clear, both types were used in the course of study three.

Origins of Factor Analysis

Spearman (1904) established the use of factor analysis within psychometric testing, having concluded that there was an underlying 'general mental ability' that seemed to tie together apparently unrelated abilities within the test scores of school children. As such, factor analysis is a term given to a group of statistical tests whose primary aim is to reduce complex sets of data. It is characterised by the assumption that there are a number of latent (unobserved) variables within a data set which, if drawn out, would be able to explain the variance in the observed variables. There are two sub-types – EFA and CFA; the former is used when the researcher wishes to explore the data set, without any pre-conceptions as to what might exist there. CFA is characterised by the testing of a theoretical model, such that there is an attempt to 'confirm' pre-existing ideas.

Nature of Factor Analysis

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA)

Cattell and Kline (1977) argued that certain criteria must be met for the successful application of an EFA to be achieved, relating to the sample size, the variables to subject ratio, the number of factors to be extracted, and the choice of rotation.

There has been extensive research on the topic of how many participants are required in EFA – with arguments based either on the total number of participants, or

the ratio of subjects to variable items. For the total number of participants, Kline (2005) advocated a minimum of 100 participants whilst Comrey and Lee (1992) argue that 100 is a poor sample, 200 fair, 300 good and 500 very good, with 1000+ being excellent. Concerning the subjects-to-variable (STV) ratio, Bryant and Yarnold (1997) argue for a rule of 5, with a subject-to-variable ratio of no less than 5:1. Kline (2000) argues for a ratio of 2:1, although he also mentions the work of Arrindell and van der Ende (1985) who claim that the STV ratio is less important than the Subject-to-Factor (STF) ratio which they argue that it should be more than 20:1.

There are a number of methods of deciding how many factor to extract from an EFA. Typically eigenvalues have been used to determine the number of factors retained, with Guttman (1954) arguing that all factors with an eigenvalue over 1 should be maintained (Kaiser's criterion). However, Hayton, Allen, and Scarpello (2004) argued that there are problems associated with it – first, that the rule is intended to be the upper boundary for the number of factors to be retained. However, often it is taken as the exact number to be kept. Second, the cut-off point is relatively arbitrary (Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum, & Strahan, 1999). Another method is to use Cattell's (1978) Scree Plot, where a few major factors account for the majority of the variance producing the 'cliff' effect, with a multitude of smaller factors as the scree. However, the decision as to where the scree starts is both subjective and ambiguous, and a scree plot should only be in conjunction with other criteria (Hayton et al., 2004).

As a product of the criticisms of Kaiser's criterion and the Scree Plot, Parallel Analysis (Horn, 1965) was primarily used in this thesis. Parallel analysis argued that the real data should have an underlying factor structure which will be revealed when compared to random data using the same sample parameters, such that "nontrivial components from real data with a valid underlying factor structure should have larger eigenvalues than parallel components derived from random data having the same sample size and number of variables" (Hayton et al., 2004, p.194). In practice, the eigenvalues of both data sets are compared, to test out the value of each eigenvalue against its paired partner (i.e. the first eigenvalue of the real data set is compared to the first eigenvalue of the random data set). At the point there the random eigenvalue is higher than the real data set eigenvalue, the factor is rejected, since it indicates that the model value is effectively random and could be as much sampling error as true variance.

The process of identifying factors requires the rotation of factors to such a position as best explain the data (Kline, 2005). With orthogonal rotation factors remain uncorrelated with each other, whilst in oblique rotation the correlation of factors is allowed.

With EFA, there is a best fit for explaining the given correlations in a rotation, known as the 'simple structure'. Simple structure is a state where variables load either near 1 (perfect loading) or 0 (no loading) onto a factor, so clearly indicating which variables are important in the interpretation of a factor. There are a number of advantages to having simple structure – first, simple structure factors usually have a few high loadings and are therefore being easier to interpret (Kline, 2005). Secondly, the factors in a simple structure are replicable, an important factor in establishing rigour (Cattell, 1978).

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

CFA seeks to test an *a priori* model, with the expectation of a number of factors and particular structure being represented in the final model. In CFA a number of statistical tests are applied to the model produced, not with the intention of declaring a model as being 'correct' but indicating that the model is a plausible means of explaining the variation shown in the data. Kelloway (1998) writes that there are two traditions in terms of assessment of model fit – Absolute Fit and Comparative Fit, with the latter being broken down into Assessments of Comparative Fit, and of Parsimonious Fit. Absolute fit reflects the ability of the model to reproduce the actual covariance matrix, whilst an assessment of Comparative Fit compares two or more models to see which fits the data better. Finally an assessment of Parsimonious Fit argues that the better fit can always be achieved through the addition or elimination of pathways within the computed model Kelloway (1998). It has been argued that it is prudent to report goodness-of-fit criteria across these assessment types (Kelloway, 1998). Following the recommendations of Bryne (2012) the following indices were used, with their membership of the fit measures being indicated:

- Chi square ratio (X^2/df; Absolute Fit)

- Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA; Absolute Fit)

- Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR; Absolute Fit)

- Comparative Fit Index (CFI; Comparative Fit)

- Tucker-Lewis Index / Non-normed Fit Index (TLI / NNFI; Comparative Fit)

The Chi square (X^2) indices is affected by sample size, so making it increasingly unlikely for the Chi square value to be accepted as the sample size increases (Joreskog, 1969). As such, the chi square ratio (X^2/df) was used in this study. Kelloway (1998) warns that there is little consensus on the appropriate levels of fit using the Chi square ratio and advocates caution, though later work by Brown (2011) reports a ratio of less than 2 as being good, with a ratio of less than 3 as being acceptable, and greater than 5 as non-acceptable. The Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA - J. Steiger, 1990) was also reported, with Hu and Bentler (1999) reporting that a figure close to .05 or less as being an useful cut-off, though 0.08 is also seen as acceptable (Brown, 2011). The Comparative Fit Index (CFI: Bentler, 1990a) was also used, with a cut-off value of above .90. Hu and Bentler (1999) recommend the use of the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR: Joreskog & Sorbom, 1981), with a cut-off value close to .8 (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Finally, the Tucker-Lewis index (TFI or NNFI - Tucker & Lewis, 1973) was used, with a cut-off of 0.90 (Hu & Bentler, 1999).

Certain common measures such the Goodness-of-Fit index (GFI) and Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit index (AFGI) were not included because, as indicated by Marsh, Balla and McDonald (1988) and Anderson and Gerbing (1984), they are both affected by sample size. As the sample size increases, larger values of GFI and AFGI are required to indicate an acceptable model fit resulting in a situation where, with a suitably large sample size, any model might be seen as having a poor goodness-of-fit. Table 5.3 provides a summary of the appropriate cut-off levels.

Table 5.0.3: Cut-off measures for Goodness of Fit Indices

Measure	Target Score	Reference
Chi square ratio	Good < 2	Joreskog (1969).
	Acceptable < 3	
	Not acceptable > 5	
RMSEA	Good < 0.05	Steiger (1990); Hu and
	Acceptable < 0.08	Bentler (1999).
	Marginal < 0.10	
	Bad > 0.10	
CFI	Good > 0.90	Bentler (1990a).
Standardized RMR	Good < 0.05	Joreskog (1981).
	Acceptable < 0.08	
NNFI (TLI)	Acceptable > 0.90	Tucker (1973).
	Good > 0.95	

RMSEA, Root Mean Square of Approximation; CFI, Comparative Fit Index; SRMR, Standardized Root Mean Square residual; TLI (NNFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (Non-normed Fit Index);

Reliability

Reliability relates to the estimation of the accuracy of a questionnaire (Rust & Golombok, 2009). Cronbach (1951) developed the test statistic Cronbach's Alpha, where he proposed that a test be broken into a series of sub-tests, with each sub-test being one test item in length – so resulting in X number of subtests. Cronbach correlated each sub-test with the others and created an average correlation which acts as an estimate of reliability. Values over 0.7 are seen as an indication of having a test with acceptable levels of internal consistency, though Cronbach's alpha values over 0.9 should be treated with caution (Kline, 2005). This suggests that inter-item correlations are too high, with item redundancy.

Rationale for Choosing Factor Analysis

Studies One and Two used qualitative analysis to create a theoretical model for the presentation of self in MMOs; however, to establish whether the model was representative of the underlying data within the general population, it was necessary to

analyse the data from a quantitative version of the model. Factor analysis was an appropriate way of achieving this, since it could reduce a large amount of data to find any underlying factors that might account for the variance in the model – with EFA and CFA being the two variations available.

With respect to EFA, there has been extensive debate on whether principal components analysis or maximum likelihood factor analysis should be used as the method of extraction; Bentler and Kano (1990b) and Floyd and Widaman (1995), amongst others, insisted that principle components analysis is not a true factor analytic method, but only a data reduction method. Others, such as Steiger (1990), argued that there is no discernible difference between PCA and EFA. A significant criticism by Ford, MacCallum and Tait (1986) was that principle components analysis is that components are calculated using all the variance available in the variables – including error and unique variance. As a consequence of these criticisms, maximum likelihood EFA was used.

For CFA, following the argument by Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum and Strahan (1999) who said that maximum likelihood factor analysis is best used because "it allows for the computation of a wide range of indexes of the goodness of fit of the model" (p.277), maximum likelihood was used as the means of analysis.

Factor analysis is a powerful analytic technique, which can clear away irrelevant information and inform theorising (Eysenck, 1991), but it is not without its faults. Given that the underlying mechanism looks at correlations between variables, no causal inference can be established; in itself this is not problematic, but the technique does require a degree of subjectivity in the choice of factor analysis, type of rotation, and number of factors, etc. which might allow experimenter bias to creep in (Eysenck, 1991). This possibility can be diminished by remembering that the results of a factor analysis must be placed within the context of existing research, so being cautious in extrapolating too far from the study results (Widaman, 1993). More generally though, there has been research questioning whether the identification of general factors (particularly at population levels) can reveal anything useful about psychological structures on an individual level (Cervone & Pervin, 2007). As Borsboom, Mellenbergh, and van Heerden (2003) argued, populations and individuals are very different things, with the only reliable way of verifying a model being to test it on each individual. Obviously this would be unfeasible and, in some respects, antithetical to the concept of

factor analysis as a data reduction technique however, it should be acknowledged that in creating increasingly generalised accounts of human interaction, some detail is lost in the process.

5.2.2 Research Procedure

As with Studies One and Two, to ensure transparency in the research process this section provides details the sampling strategy used to acquiring participants, how they were recruited, and ethical information concerning the anonymity of the participant, and the security of the data.

Sampling Strategy

As with Studies One and Two, Study Three employed a purposive expert sampling methods. This was due to the necessity of having only gamers complete the online questionnaire, since they needed to possess knowledge specific to the playing of games in order to answer the questions accurately. It is possible that the participants were not active gamers, but this would not have been problematic, since the research was not looking exclusively at the presentation of the current self in MMOs. As with existing research (Osborne, 2012), gamers were simply required to have had gaming experience.

Recruiting Participants

Given the impetus to gather as many participants as possible, the questionnaire was advertised across a number of game forums and Facebook groups (with the permission of forum and group administrators) to order to gather participants. The full list of forums and groups can be found in appendix XI – it should be noted that particular effort was made to include smaller MMOs since not all gamers play the major MMOs (e.g. World of Warcraft, Rift, Star Wars: The Old Republic, etc.). The questionnaire advertisements were active for seven weeks.

In total 42 forums and three Facebook groups were canvassed, with the result that 679 participants contributed to the study. To check for the possibility of individuals doing the questionnaire multiple times, the ISP number of each participant (provided automatically by the online company) were checked for duplicates. Aside for duplicates for responses from the student cohort, as might be expected if University computers were being used, no suspicious activity was detected.

Of this number, 44 were removed from the dataset as a product of their demographic response indicating they were below the minimum age of 18 years; one participant provided a spurious age (99 years) so creating sufficient uncertainty as to remove his / her data. An additional 223 participants were removed from the study, either for having insufficiently completed data sets (i.e. 50% completion) or for having provided no age at all. Finally, three participants were removed as part of the internal checks on the data, since their answers indicated that the questionnaire had been completed randomly. Overall, the participant's cohort was made up of 408 participants, after partially completed data sets were imputed to fill the missing data.

In appendix XII the statement provided in the initial thread of the game forums can be found. There are three versions of the initial statement, depending on whether the game required payment to play, was free to play, or if the statement was being sent to a student population. All participants who took part in the research were entered into a prize draw, if they so wished, with a main prize of £100 of Amazon vouchers, with four runners-up prizes of £25 worth of Amazon vouchers. These were allocated at the end of the study by giving each 'willing' participant a number, and then using a random number generator to 'pull out' the winning numbers.

Anonymity, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent

The ethics for the third study followed the code of ethics laid down by the BPS and NTU ethics committee. Since Study Three involved no direct contact with the participants all statements pertaining to ethical matters required a separate page in the questionnaire. As can be seen from the structure of Study 3 in appendix XIII, the initial pages of the questionnaire provided the participants with relevant information required to make an informed decision. This included information concerning the anonymising of personal data, the procedure for the withdrawal of data, and concerning the security

and destruction of the study data. Having been told this, and been provided with additional ethics material, participants were required to tick a box should they agree to the ethical conditions and wish to carry on. They were also required to provide a Unique Identifier so that, in the event of wishing to withdraw their data, they could be identified.

At the end of the questionnaire, participants were again reminded what the topic had been and were provided with contact details for assistance should they wish to talk to a third party. In addition they were provided with my email address should they wish to make contact for any reason.

5.2.3 Data Collection

Development of the Online Questionnaire

The questionnaire for the study was created directly from the concepts created in the first two studies. Initially there were 44 concepts in the model but it was decided that to include all 44 would have been excessive since each concept required multiple items to establish reliability (Bollen, 1989). Some concepts also had multiple dimensions, which could have resulted in some concepts having upwards of 6 questions associated with them. Such a structure would have produced upward of 150 test items, which would have produced an unwieldy test.

Theoretically there could have been a number of tests constructed for different sub-sections of the model, but as Streiner and Norman (2008) argued, that level of specificity might have produced a series of tests that suffered from a lack of generalizability. In addition, well designed general questionnaires often yield comparable results to specific questionnaires (Parkerson et al., 1993).

The original 44 concepts were considered for their Uniqueness and Supporting evidence, such that inclusion in the study three questionnaire would both enrich the quantitative data set by representing all facets of the model, but with sufficient evidence as to justify their inclusion. On this basis the concepts in the theoretical model were sorted into one of four categories, as can be found in appendix XIV.

In total there were 19 concepts, 31 associated properties of those concepts, with 66 questions arising from those properties, with an addition 12 demographic questions.

For the creation of the questions, it was important to stay close to the qualitative work, so the concept statements were drawn directly from the Grounded Theory concepts. Generally there were two statements for each concept, but more complex concepts had three.

Participants were given a five point Likert scale with which to provide their answer, ranging from Strongly Disagree, through Neutral, to Strongly Agree. Following good research protocols, some questionnaire statements were phrased to be opposite of the concept meaning.

When the raw scores were compared against the normally coded statement for that code, it was easier to check if the respondent was exhibiting response bias by randomly filling out the questionnaire (Nardi, 2006). If this was found the data was removed from the data set. The questionnaire was created using a commercial online survey website – http://www.kwiksurveys.com/. As outlined earlier on, the use of the online environment allowed for the distribution of a questionnaire across a wide spectrum of potential participants (Wood, Griffiths, & Eatough, 2004). With respect to the questions themselves, a randomised pattern was used to distribute the questions – this was achieved by allocating the 1st, 8th, 15th, etc. question to the first page, and the 2nd, 9th, and 16th to the second, etc. This was done to ensure that no two questions relating to the same concept would be on the same page, so reducing any potential carry-over effects or boredom. In total there were seven topic related pages, with another one allocated to demographics. Overall, including participant information consent form, additional information and the debrief form, there were 15 pages in the questionnaire.

Pre-test

The primary function of the pre-test phase is to establish whether the questionnaire items are being understood correctly (Streiner & Norman, 2008). To that effect, the author went over the questionnaire with two volunteers to determine whether the participants were answering the questions being asked of them.

One participant went through the questionnaire in person, whilst a second talked through the questionnaire over the telephone. The time taken to complete the questionnaire ranged from 40 minutes to one hour and ten minutes. Mistakes corrected included ambiguity, use of gaming jargon and overly complicated questions – the

printed notes of these pre-test interviews can be found in appendix XV. Examples of corrections might be rewriting ambiguity questions, clarifying gaming jargon, and simplifying overly complicated questions. In total, 30 questions were altered in a way so as to improve their comprehension.

Pilot study

Having completed the pre-test phase, the primary concern of the Pilot phase was to establish the usability of the questionnaire 'in the field'. In this respect there were two aims – that the questionnaire could be understood and completed satisfactorily, and that the completion of the questionnaire was within tolerable boundaries concerning missing data and random filling of answers. For the first of these aims was achieved by checking that the link to the questionnaire directed the participants to the correct site, that all sections of the questionnaire were answered and that the data were being gathered correctly.

Since the aim of the pilot study was not analytic in nature, but establishing that it worked satisfactorily, no inferential statistics were conducted on the data. However, limited descriptive statistics were applied, that indicated a mean age of 31.3 (SD=7.46) with a range between 18 and 50 years old, and that 32.7% (16) of the participants were female.

The pilot phase continued until 49 participants had been acquired; this was seen as an acceptable figure, lying between the 65 of Su, Fang, Miller and Wang (2011) and the 21 of Cantor et al. (2005). As a product of being field tested no problems were found, and the questionnaire was rolled out across all available platforms for full completion.

5.2.4 Process of Data Analysis

Before the full factor analysis could occur, it was necessary both to clean the data and address the issue of missing data, so that the information acquired might be useable with SPSS and MPLUS ((Muthén & Muthén, 1998 - 2014).

Data Cleaning

This procedure is described by Van den Broeck, Cunningham, Eekels and Herbst (2005, p.966) as the "process of detecting, diagnosing, and editing faulty data". The process of data cleaning followed six steps, as Table 5.4 illustrates.

Table 5.0.4: Data Cleaning Process

Step	Action
1	*Removal of data sets with participants below 18 years old or with a spurious answer* – 45 participants were removed at this stage
2	*Removal of non-completions* – in total there were 223 participants who failed to answer any questions at all, or who had incomplete data sets which could not be justifiably included in the final analysis
3	*Identification of Response Bias* – three participants had results that indicated, beyond reasonable doubt that the questionnaire was filled out randomly.
4	*Recoding of Reversed Questions*
5	*Removal of demographics into separate data set*
6	*Removal of questions which were justifiably not completed (i.e. not applicable)*

With the inclusion of partial data sets, but after having removed unrecoverable non-completions, those with identified response bias, and participants below 18 (or with an unknown age), there were 408 participant data sets. Given that demographic results cannot have missing data replaced, the demographic data were strictly limited to those who filled in the entire questionnaire – as such there were 408 demographic data sets, with this information being moved to a separate data set since it was not used in the factor analysis.

Missing Data

The issue of missing data is of great importance in Factor Analysis since complete data sets are required for the analysis. Rubin (1976, in Sterner, 2011) argued that there are three types of missing data – Missing completely at random (MCAR), Missing at random (MAR) and Missing not at random (MNAR).

MCAR data are values that have been missed without any apparent pattern, such that the 'missingness' is independent of any characteristic of the participant or the research process. MAR data are those that are missing due a function of the questionnaire participant, which are not randomly distributed across the data set, but instead localised within a specific subgroup. Finally, MNAR data are those missing values which are due a systematic error within the research process and as such, are represented as there not being an equal chance of the missing values across the variable.

In this thesis, there are no MCAR or MNAR values due to the requirement that participants had to answer each question and could not progress to the next page if they did not. It is acknowledged however that MAR values do exist in the data. This is due to the fact that some participants exited the questionnaire after having completed a certain number of pages, but not enough to create a completed data set.

There are several methods for dealing with missing data (Sterner, 2011) – the simplest of which is Case / Variable deletion, where any participants with missing data are deleted from the analysis. Whilst this is a brutally effective method in removing missing data, it has been argued that it is only acceptable when there is a large sample with relatively few affected cases (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2006), with a random distribution of missing values. Another problem is that the potentially drastic reduction of the data set can reduce its statistical power (Acock, 2005). Pairwise deletion involves ignoring any missing data, but utilising any available data for a particular participant. This has the advantage of maximising the existing data, which in turn maintains statistical power but does cause problems in statistical analysis due to the sample size varying. Another method of dealing with missing data is that of imputation. Mean imputation involves substituting the mean of the existing values of a variable into the cases with missing data. However, this procedure can reduce variance in the data set and reduces correlation strength (Hair et al., 2006).

Two other approaches would be to use either the Full Information Maximum Likelihood or Multiple Imputations, as advocated by Schafer (2002). The algorithm works by estimating the parameters of the data that do exist, and from there predicting the missing data on the basis of those parameters. The parameters of the data (as a whole) are then estimated again, on the basis of the filled-in data, and so on. The final method of multiple imputation is known as the Marcov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC)

method, where the missing values are filled by simulated versions of the data with a randomly drawn error component inserted, with several iterations of the data occurring.

On the premise that it maintained the data set to the fullest extent possible, whilst not reducing statistical power or reducing variance (Graham, 2003), the Full Information Maximum Likelihood method was used to conduct the imputation of the missing data of the data set in study three.

5.3 Quantitative Model

5.3.1 Demographic Results

Together with the questions relating to the model, there were also a number of demographic questions, the results of which are outlined below. One participant who completed the study did not submit demographic data, so resulting in the demographic results being based on 407 participants. Formatting has been completed to ensure that each table remains on one page, for the ease of comprehension.

Sex & Age

93 (22.9%) of the participants were female, with an average age across the sample population of 26.56 years (SD=9.06), with a range between 18 and 68 years old. Broken down into 10 year age brackets, the sample based on age is shown in Table 5.5.

Table 5.0.5: Age of Participants

Age Group	Number of Participants
18 – 24	224 (55.0%)
25 – 34	113 (27.8%)
35 – 44	52 (12.8%)
45 – 54	12 (2.9%)
55+	6 (1.5%)
Missing	0 (N/A)
Total	407 (100.0%)

It can be seen that the large majority of the participants were in the 18 – 24 bracket; this is somewhat contrary to the results of Williams, Yee and Caplan (2008) who found that there were more MMO players in their 30s than their 20s, but the figure in this thesis reflects the large number of student respondents.

Employment Status

Table 5.0.6: Employment Status of the Participants

Employment Status	Number of Participants
Student	182 (44.7%)
Employed	142 (34.9%)
Not working	32 (7.9%)
self employed	26 (6.4%)
Away from work / Ill, Maternity Leave	17 (4.2%)
Employer	5 (1.2%)
Government sponsored scheme	3 (0.7%)
Total	407 (100%)

It can be seen from Table 5.6 that the largest group of participants were students, but the demographic data also revealed that the employed also made up a substantial portion of the participants. This indicates that despite the possible heavy time commitments required by MMOs, players will allocate free time to playing such games.

Highest Educational Qualification

Table 5.0.7: Highest Educational Qualification of the Participants

Highest Qualification	Number of Participants
No qualifications	24 (5.9%)
GSCE's / O Levels	30 (7.4%)
A Levels	186 (43.7%)
Degree	133 (32.7%)
Masters / PhD	42 (10.3%)
Total	407 (100%)

Table 5.7 illustrates that most of the participants had achieved A-levels (or equivalent) as their highest educational qualification. Almost a third had a degree however, with the minority (10.3%) having a higher educational qualification of a Masters or PhD. This finding agrees with that of Williams, Yee and Caplan (2008) also found that the majority of Everquest 2 players were well educated.

Age started playing computer games

Table 5.0.8: Age started playing computer games

Age	Number of Participants
Up to 9	202 (50.2%)
10 – 14	128 (31.9%)
15 – 19	44 (10.9%)
20 – 24	11 (2.8%)
25+	17 (4.2%)
Missing	5 (N/A)
Total	407 (100%)

Table 5.8 indicates that the vast majority of participants (82.1%) started playing computer games before they were fourteen, with a mean age of 10.5 years (SD=6.58), and a minimum of 2 and maximum of 53 years. This would seem to indicate that increasingly, young children are being allowed to play computer games. It should be acknowledged however, that with an average age of 26.56 and the relatively high proportion of student participants (44.7%), a substantial proportion of the sample would have been born with access to tablets and other mobile gaming platforms. These platforms have substantially opened up the gaming genre, so making it much more family, and child, friendly.

Primary Server Type

Table 5.0.9: Primary Server Type

Server Type	Number of Participants
Normal	158 (38.8%)
Person vs Person (PvP)	126 (31.0%)
Role-play (RP)	79 (19.4%)
Role-Play Person vs Person (RP-PvP)	46 (10.8%)
Total	407 (100%)

The majority of the MMO players played on normal servers (i.e. those where there are no RP rules and no PvP as the default setting), with almost a third playing on PvP servers, as Table 5.9 shows.

Frequencies of Games Played

Table 5.0.10: Frequencies of Games Played

Game	Number of Participants
World of Warcraft	307 (75.4%)
Runescape	134 (32.9%)
Guild Wars	124 (30.5%)
Lords of the Rings Online	123 (30.2%)
Rift	100 (24.6%)
Warhammer Online	92 (22.6%)
Eve Online	93 (22.9%)
Aion	80 (19.7%)
Age of Conan	71 (17.4%)
Final Fantasy XI	65 (16.0%)
Everquest	57 (14.0%)
Everquest 2	55 (13.5%)
City of Heroes / City of Villains	52 (12.8%)
Dark Age of Camelot	21 (5.2%)
Runescale	8 (2.0%)

Note: Participants could select multiple games

Table 5.10 shows that the most commercially successful MMO – World of Warcraft – was also played by the largest number of participants, with an impressive 75.4% of the sample. It is not the only MMO on the market however and many other games have had some element of the market share. It is also interesting to note that 14.0% of the players were playing Everquest, which was 12 years old at the time of data collection. Given the fast moving nature of the MMO environment, this indicates a strong desire to play a game that was rapidly superseded by other games.

Hours played per Week

Table 5.0.11: Hours played per Week

Hours played per Week	Number of Participants
Up to 5	40 (9.8%)
5 – 10	53 (13.0%)
11 – 15	57 (14.0%
16 – 20	71 (17.4%)
21 – 25	58 (14.3%)
26 – 30	43 (10.6%)
31 – 35	28 (6.9%)
36 – 40	20 (4.6%)
40+	37 (9.1%)
Total	407 (100%)

There is a broad spread of hours played per week, with no overly conspicuous group, although 16 – 20 hours per week was the modal score. However, there are 20.6% of players who play over thirty hours a week, or over four and quarter hours per day on average. Given the number of participants who are students or not working however, this may not be so surprising.

Importance of…

In the following section of the questionnaire each participant was asked to rate how motivating the following actions were to them when playing the game. Scores of 1 indicated the action as being of no importance to the player, whilst a score of 10 denoted the action as highly important.

Table 5.0.12: Motivational impact of different elements of game play.

Score	Seeing End-Game Content	Social Interaction	Completing Item Sets / Achievements	Expressing your 'Real self' in the game	Role Playing	PvP
1	5.2	2.7	4.4	**21.4**	**28.9**	**16.4**
2	3.5	2.2	3.4	10.7	10.0	9.2
3	2.5	4.9	6.9	12.2	9.7	8.7
4	5.4	3.9	4.9	10.7	8.7	6.5
5	7.4	10.8	9.1	13.3	8.5	8.9
6	6.2	7.4	8.1	9.9	8.5	5.5
7	13.3	12.8	12.1	6.9	5.7	10.9
8	17.0	18.4	17.5	5.9	8.5	10.9
9	16.5	14.7	14.0	4.1	3.5	8.4
10	**23.0**	**22.1**	**19.5**	4.8	8.2	14.6
Median	8	8	8	4	4	6

Note: All scores are percentages, the Modal Score is given in Bold.

From these scores relating to the importance of various aspects of the game, the most obvious point is that there is a sharp discrepancy in motivation between those elements of the game that involve presenting a version of self (Real self and Role Playing), and those that do not. However, it is also evident that Social Interaction is an important motivation for game players, which is a necessary part of the presentation of self, albeit not one that is necessarily consciously acknowledged by a lay audience.

Also interesting is the level high of motivation in completing item sets or unlocking achievements. Dubbed 'Completism' in this thesis, it relates to a category of in-game activities which have no relation to high-end game advancement. An example

of completing an item set might be getting a particular Helm, Chestpiece and pair of Gauntlets (of a specific set), whilst unlocking an achievement might be getting the Cooking of a particular character up to 450.

With respect to Expressing the 'Real' self in the game, the majority of players did not see it as being important in their gaming. It is interesting however that with a mean of 4.29 and with 31.6.% of participants giving it a score of six or more, there is evidence that the expression of self is of *some* importance to a sizable minority of players. In a similar fashion, the majority of players had no interest in Role Playing though 34.3% showed *some* interest – a figure that is all the more impressive given that only 19.4% played on a role-play server. Finally, there is a curious split between those players wishing to engage in PvP (Player versus Player) combat, where players fight each other instead of game generated monsters – there is a roughly equal number of players who take absolutely no interest in PvP, and those who are highly motivated by fighting other players..

In order to ascertain if there was any statistical difference between the means for the motivations, a Friedman's ANOVA was conducted. This was conducted instead of a more usual repeated-measures ANOVA since a Kolmogorov-Smirnov test indicated that the data was not normally distributed. The results of a Friedman ANOVA test indicated that there was a statistically significant difference across the six different possible motivations (Seeing high-end game content, Social interaction, Completism, Expressing the 'Real self', Role playing, and PvP), X^2 (5, n=380) = 432.31, p < .001.

In order to establish how the possible motivations differed to each other, a series of post-hoc Wilcoxon Signed Rank tests were conducted. A Bonferroni correction was applied and so all effects are reported at a .008 level of significance. The tests indicated a significant difference in motivational impact between some of the factors. Not all will be repeated here due to the repetition this would occur, but a summary is provided, with examples. Seeing End-Game content, Social Interaction and Completism were more motivating for the players than Expressing the Real self, Role playing or PvP (e.g. Seeing End-Game content and Expressing the Real self, z = -12.60, p < .05, r = -.45, or Social interaction and Role playing, z = -13.13, p < .05, r = -.46). Finally, PvP, though less important than Seeing end-game content, Social Interaction

and Completism, was more important as a motivator than either Expressing the Real self or Role playing (e.g. Expressing the Real self and PvP, z = -5.50, p < 0.05, r = -.20).

Results also indicated that there was a non-significant difference in motivational effects between Seeing End-Game content and Social Interaction (z = -.184, p > .05, r = .006), or between Role Playing and Expressing the Real self (z = -.145, p > .05, r = -.005). Overall, these results strongly indicate that Expressing the Real self and Role Playing were not important to most players, but instead social interaction, seeding end-game content, and completism were significantly stronger motivators.

5.3.2 1st Model - Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Guided by the work of Boomsma (2000) and Jackson, Gillaspy, and Purc-Stephenson (2009), who provide guidelines for the presentation of CFA results, the first CFA is reported here.

Theory

The first CFA sought to examine whether the model developed as a product of the first and second study was an accurate representation of the presentation of self in the underlying gaming population. In doing this, it also sought to answer the research questions of the thesis, as outlined at the start of the chapter. Given the existence of the untested model, CFA was the appropriate type of analysis to use. As with EFA, CFA reduces data down to a number of underlying factors but unlike the former, specifies the structure of those relationships before the analysis. As such then, as Kline (2005) says it is testing a model with stated associations, not conducting an exploratory analysis.

The Set of Models to be investigated

Only one model was created through the previous studies to account for the presentation of self, contrary to the work of Jackson, Gillaspy, and Purc-Stephenson (2009) who suggest that there should be multiple models to compare in the analysis. Given the grounded theory approach that this thesis used, such an approach would

have been seemed contradictory suggesting as it would that the produced model was not the most appropriate fit for the model. However, whilst the use of one model might be unusual for CFA, it does not invalidate the use of this method for testing out the existent model.

Sample

For the first CFA, the full data set was used – that is, 408 participants.

Features of the Observations

The data used in the CFA was continuous, though based on Likert scales with a range from 1 to 5 (1 – Strongly Disagree, 2 – Disagree, 3 – Neutral, 4 – Agree, 5 – Strongly Agree). In this respect, the participant would be asked to say how much they agreed or disagreed with the concept statement drawn from the model.

The Estimation Procedure

The CFA was conducted using Mplus Version 4.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 1998 - 2014), with a complete CFA of the full model being completed. Having done that, recommendations made by Mplus for additional paths and error co-variances were applied – in an attempt to create a model that would fit to the data. In the analysis itself, a Maximum Likelihood estimation procedure was used. The Maximum likelihood procedure is the most widely used method of estimation, followed by Generalised Least Squares (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988).

Evaluation and Model Modification

In the course of first CFA a number of models were tested, although aside from the original primary model drawn from the qualitative study, they were exclusively derived from statistical data. Readers are reminded that the primary thesis model consisted of Elements of self, Social Interaction, Motivations, Nature of MMOs, and Emotionality – in appendix XVI the concept statements, plus their associated CFA names can be found:

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- Model One: Drawn from the qualitative model developed through Studies 1 and 2.

- Models Two and Three: Models created as a product of following suggestions made by modification indices. Neither were as successful as Model Four, and so the specific goodness of fit measures are not reported.

- Model Four: Final model based on modification indices that successfully ran without serious run errors. As a product of following suggestions made by the Mplus modification indices, the following alterations were made to the model – where 'with' indicates a link between concept statements, and 'by' a link to a factor:

  - Character Creation 1 with Importance of Looks 1
  - Gaming History 2 with Gaming History 1
  - Character Creation 1 with Spontaneity 1
  - Character Infringement 2 with Character Infringement 1
  - Identity Re-assertion 2 with Identity Re-assertion 1
  - Life Impact 2 with Life Impact 1
  - First Character 1 with Character Creation 2
  - Emotional Impact 2 with Emotional Impact 1
  - Importance of Immersion 2 with Importance Immersion 1
  - Moral Consequences 2 with Moral Consequences 1
  - Spontaneity 1 with Importance of Looks 1
  - Social Referencing 3 with Moral Consequences 1
  - Offline Impact 1 with Offline Impact 2
  - Replication 1 with Replication 2
  - Escape 1 with Escape 2

  - Self by Importance of Looks 1

- Model Five: A model based on model four, with additional changes made as a product of modification indices. The model failed to converge and was discarded.

- Model Six: A Unidimensional model with all indicators loading on to 'Elements of self' – this failed to converge and therefore will not be reported.

- Model Seven: A model with higher and lower level factors, based on imposed structural model. This is also failed to converge, and was discarded

Table 5.13 reports the fit indices for models one and four – the original five factor model, and the five factor model with the outlined Mplus modification indices suggestions.

Table 5.0.13: Fit Indices for CFA Models for the Presentation of self in MMOs

Item	Goodness-of-Fit	Model One	Model Four
Chi square ratio	Good < 2	3.37	2.30
	Acceptable < 3		
	Not acceptable > 5		
Df	N/A	1367	1864
P Value	N/A	0.001	0.001
RMSEA	Good < 0.05	.076	.056
(90% CI)	Acceptable < 0.08	(.074 - .079)	(.054 – 0.59)
	Marginal < 0.10		
	Bad > 0.10		
CFI	Good > 0.90	.610	.737
Standardized	Good < 0.05	.084	.074
RMR	Acceptable < 0.08		
NNFI (TLI)	Acceptable > 0.90	.591	.724
	Good > 0.95		

Note: RMSEA, Root Mean Square of Approximation; CFI, Comparative Fit Index; SRMR, Standardized Root Mean Square residual; TLI (NNFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (Non-normed Fit Index).

The original qualitative model had a poor fit across most of the chosen measures, aside from RMSEA which indicated an extremely moderate fit. As a product of this analysis, the original model as developed during Studies one and two had to be discarded.

By following the Mplus modification indices, a number of alterations (as indicated above) were made to the structure of the first model, so finally producing model four. These adjustments had the effect of making the model a closer fit to the data, although it is acknowledged that from a theoretical basis, the modifications were not justified. Given that the fifth iteration of the model (again prompted by modification indices) failed to converge without errors, the fourth model represented

the most viable model under the current configuration – but whilst the Chi Square Ratio and SRMR improved so as to indicate an 'acceptable' fit, the CFI and TLI were not acceptable. On this basis, and being in mind the lack of theoretical justification for the changes, it was decided to discard the fourth model and to re-analyse the data using an EFA, with a subsequent CFA to assess the results. Given that neither the original model, nor the fourth version achieved an acceptable fit, factor loadings for these models will not be presented.

1st Model Discussion

Overall the first CFA failed to support the qualitative model that intended to provide a coherent account of presentation of self in MMOs. Even with the use of modifications as suggested by Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998 - 2014), the revised model did not meet the appropriate requirements for model fit, so indicating that the original Five Factor model could not be supported. Whilst it would have been possible to have carried on altering the original model based on Mplus suggestions, Kelloway (1998) warns against such a course. His argument is that due to the re-adjustment being post-hoc and empirically derived, that optimally the model should be validated against a new independent sample. Whilst it is acceptable to modify a model and assess the validity on the same data, the interpretation of such modifications is suspect and that parameters added or deleted cannot be said to be confirmed (James and James, in Kelloway, 1998).

Essentially, the risk is that changes made on the basis of a chance variation may not be replicated in a subsequent sample. To alleviate this problem all changes should be theoretically consistent (Kline, 2005), though Steiger (in Kelloway, 1998) warned that researchers can potentially rationalise all beneficial changes to their model, so requiring some self-awareness on the part of the researcher.

So, the original model does not have the necessary accuracy to answer the research questions as established at the start of the thesis and the drawing of implications is limited. Although the analysis did not provide a favourable fit for the model, which would have been the optimal result, it was entirely necessary and appropriate that a CFA was initially employed. Given the theoretical structure that already existed from the qualitative data, an EFA would have been unsuitable. However,

given the lack of fit, the original model must be discarded and an EFA run on the Study three data to establish whether a fit can be achieved.

5.3.3 2nd Model – Exploratory Factor Analysis

Theory

Given the failure of the initial model to achieve a satisfactory goodness-of-fit, even with alterations adopted as suggested by Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 1998 - 2014), it was necessary to re-analyse the data. Following the work of Kelloway (1998) who argued that an EFA can justifiably follow a CFA model with a poor goodness of fit result, it was decided to conduct an EFA on one half of the data. This would allow a factor structure to be drawn directly from the data, with a CFA being run on the second half of the data to substantiate it. This technique of splitting the sample is entirely valid and found within the literature (e.g. Thompson, Kirk, & Brown, 2006).

Sample

The EFA used the same dataset as that used for the original CFA and as such the participant sampling procedures and action taken on missing data as previously discussed are applicable. Due to the intention to conduct an additional CFA on the results of this EFA, the sample was split into two with the first 204 being used for the EFA, and the 203 being used for a second CFA. Whilst this necessarily reduced the sample size, it is still in line with guidance arguing either for a total number of participants (Kline, 2005; Comney & Lee, 1992, in MacCallum, Widaman, Zhang, & Hong, 1999) or a variable-to-subject ratio (2:1 in Kline, 2000).

To ensure some degree of randomisation across the split data set, the first participant was allocated to the EFA analysis, the second to the CFA, and so on. This ensured that if any particular participant population were in one part of the database (e.g. the student samples), then they would be randomly distributed across both data sets. Demographics for the EFA sample indicated that they were between 18 and 68 years of age, with a mean of 26.59 (SD=9.180), of which 22.1% were female, and 77.9% male.

Results

Initially, the factorability of the sixty two items was examined. Several well recognised criteria for the ability of a correlation to be factored were used. Firstly, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.765, above the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1974) and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant (X^2 (1891) = 4873.63, $p < 0.01$). All but one of the diagonals of the anti-image correlation matrix were all over 0.5, so indicating that the inclusion of each item in the factor analysis would be appropriate. One item (Time Invested 2) was below 0.5, and was removed from the analysis.

However, not all communalities were over 0.30, indicating that some items did not share common variance with all other items. The correlation matrix was also assessed to check for multicollinearity, and with a determinant figure of 2.51×10^{-17} (confirmed using Haitovsky's X^2_H (Haitovsky, 1969)) it was confirmed that the data set was not significantly different from potential singularity – i.e. that there was not multicollinearity. Examination of the data showed that the multicollinearity was not extreme (i.e. that the variables are highly correlated) or singular (perfectly correlated), but instead that some elements of data had low correlations. However, Field (2009) argued the mild multicollinearity is not problematic in factor analysis since low correlations can be removed during the analysis. Indeed, Bartlett's test of sphericity, being significant, indicated that the correlations are significantly different from zero. As such, whilst the data set does not meet the conditions for multicollinearity, its direction and the significant result of Bartlett's test of sphericity means that this is not a concern.

For EFA analysis, research indicates a minimum factor loading of .30 as being appropriate (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001), which indicates an approximate 10% overlap of variance with other items in the given factor. However, to be more rigorous, for this analysis a minimum factor loading of .40 was used, as advocated by Stevens (Stevens, 2012). This was done partially with a mind to reducing the large number of variables in the data set, but also to ensure strong loadings onto the factors. An oblique rotation was used, given the probability that the factors might be correlated, employing a Promax rotation.

Table 5.14 shows the parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) comparisons, which indicated that nine factors would provide the most parsimonious solution – explaining 52.95% of the variance in the dataset.

Table 5.0.14: Parallel Analysis for Results of Exploratory Factor Analysis

Factor	Exploratory Factor Analysis Eigenvalues	Parallel Analysis Sample Eigenvalues
1	12.601	2.287
2	3.933	2.166
3	3.199	2.073
4	2.713	1.998
5	2.556	1.928
6	2.162	1.864
7	1.991	1.811
8	1.901	1.753
9	1.771	1.703
10	1.648	1.652

As discussed in section 5.2.1, in parallel analysis random eigenvalues are compared to the model eigenvalues. At the point where the random values is higher than the model value, this factor is discarded and the factors already accepted are included in the final model. In table 5.14 it can be seen that the parallel analysis advised the retention of up to nine factors.

However, when looking at the variables that loaded onto the factors, it became apparent that nine factors would be unsustainable – due to the 6th, 7th, and 9th factors only having two loading variables each (Gorsuch, 2003; Kline, 2005). Moreover, for two of the factors the pairs were drawn from the same concept, such that the statements were strongly correlated. For example, for factor seven, the concept statements were 'If I even think about changing an aspect of my character…I feel guilty for doing so' and 'If I've changed how a character looks in the past of how they act, I've felt extremely guilty for doing so'. These were originally included to check for random completion of the questionnaire and to check correlation strengths, however having one factor based on only one concept would be tenuous. Factor eight did have three concept statements

loading onto it, but given the exclusion of the previous two, it would have been bad practice to have selected it due to effectively allowing 'cherry picking' of those factors that were desirable.

Looking at the remaining factors and their respective variables, and taking both eigenvalues and a scree plot (see figure 5.1 below) into account, it was decided that five factors accounted for the greatest variance, and in the most parsimonious manner. This was the most effective means of deciding upon the number of factors to use, primarily using the statistical strength of power analysis (Horn, 1965), but also using the visual element of the scree plot (Cattell, 1978) to establish the most efficacious fit.

Figure 5.1: Scree Plot of EFA Results
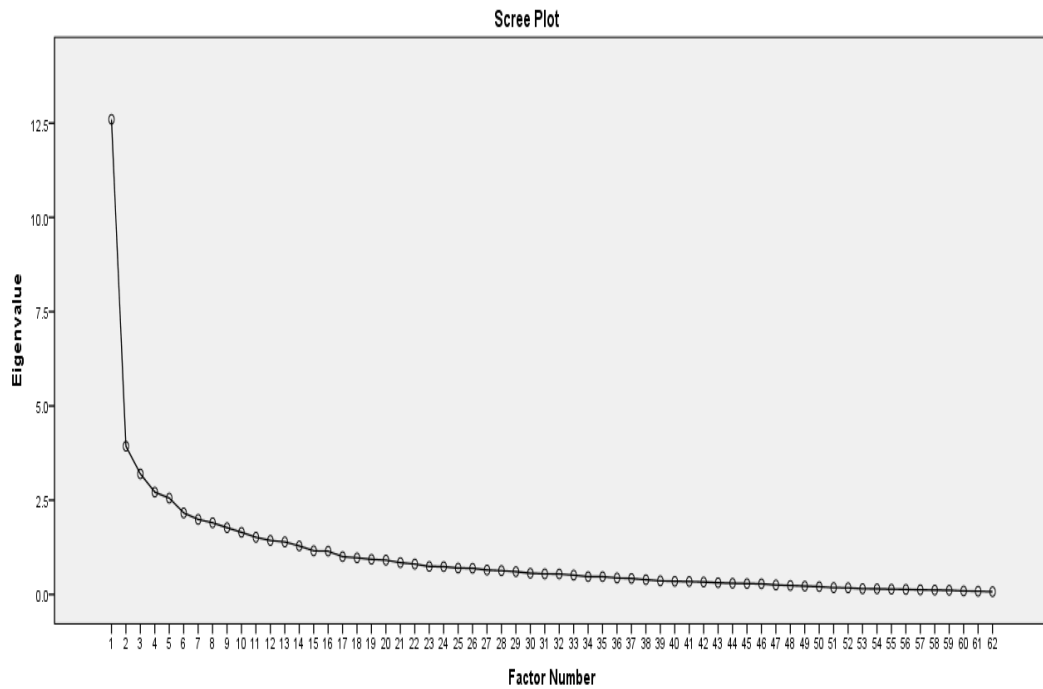
On the next two pages, on Table 5.15 the factor loadings for the EFA are provided. Those question numbers with a 'R' indicate a question that has been recoded, so that the opposite meaning should be taken when reading the results. It should be noted that although an oblique rotation has been used, the pattern matrix was employed to establish factor loading, so the *unique* loadings onto each of the factors could be established.

Overall, the model had five factors, explaining 40.33% of the variance in the data set.

Table 5.0.15: Factor Loadings based upon an Exploratory Factor Analysis

Item	Factor				
	1	2	3	4	5
In the past when creating a character, I wanted him / her to resemble me – either physically or mentally.	.852				
With at least one of my characters, when I created him / her it was important that he / she looked like me as much as possible.	.845				
My first 'proper' character contains many elements of what I see as 'myself'.	.805				
It is not important to me whether my character(s) represent me or not, the only reason I play is to have fun. (R)	.588				
When creating a character, it is important to me that he / she contain some element (emotional, intellectual, spiritual, etc.) of 'me'.	.579				
I feel that at least one of my characters can represent the 'real' me.	.565				
When creating a character, I like them to show some of my real life beliefs and attitudes.	.541				
I think that the way that I present myself in the game is a reflection of my real life identity.	.413				
Friendships that I've made through MMOs are very important to me.		.956			
Online friendships have had an impact on my real world life.		.923			
The fact that MMOs are social environments where I can interact with other people is very important to me.		.404			
The way my character looks in the game is very important to me.			.939		
When I create a character, the way they look is important to me.			.894		

When creating characters, I don't really think about their looks, what they say about me, etc. at all. (R)	.702	
If I get a piece of gear that doesn't look good on my character, I'll consider not using it.	.650	
One reason I have multiple characters is because this enables me to explore different sides of my real world personality.		.703
MMOs allow me to act out parts of myself better than I can do in the real world.		.634
The chance to express different aspects of myself through a game character(s) is very important to me.		.633
If I engage in role play, I use it as a means of expressing different parts of my real world self – whether they are hidden aspects or those that I frequently show.		.504
The ability to role play a character in a MMO is very important to me.		.463
When I create a character, I think a lot about what they'll say about me as a player.		.459
I am often emotionally affected by what happens in the game.		.748
Things that happen in the game can often have a strong emotional effect on me in real life.		.625
Often other players can influence how I feel whilst I'm playing.		.410

Note: Maximum Likelihood Extraction Method, Promax Rotation Method

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Table 5.0.16: Factor Correlation Matrix for the EFA

Factor	1	2	3	4	5
1	1.000				
2	.196	1.000			
3	.277	.023	1.000		
4	.501	.286	.336	1.000	
5	.363	.420	.173	.357	1.000

Note: Maximum Likelihood Extraction Method, Promax Rotation Method

Referring to table 5.16 and the factor loadings, the factors were deemed to represent the following grouping of concepts.

Factor One: Presentation of the Existing self

With a focus on concept statements that relate to the self and the presentation of self in MMOs, it was only natural that, as with the original qualitative model, the core concept was Elements of self. The concept statement "In the past when creating a character, I wanted him / her to resemble me – either physically or mentally" had the highest loading, of .852, so indicating a strong connection between the character and the existing offline self. Other concept statements included reference to the first character with a factor loading of .805 ("My first 'proper' character contains many elements of what I see as 'myself'"), and reference to the real self, with a factor loading of .565 ("I feel that at least one of my character can represent the 'real' me"). Given the chosen cut-off loading of .40, following the work of Stevens (Stevens, 2012), all the concept statements had strong loadings, with the lowest of .413 subsequently still showing a strong correlation ("I think that the way I present myself in the game is a reflection of my real life identity").

Overall, the first factor showed an archetypal pattern, with 20.32% of the variance explained by this concept, and eight concept statements loading onto it. All of the statement related to a desire for their gaming character to replicate or be a 'placeholder' for their existing offline version of self. Reliability statistics indicated a Cronbach's Alpha of .850 for the statement group, well above the recommended cut-off of .70 (Kline, 2005).

Factor Two: Social Interaction

With a strong emphasis on the social elements of MMOs, and with reference to concept statements such as "Friendships that I've made through playing MMOs are very important to me", with a factor loading of .956, factor two links directly to social interaction.

Interestingly, the second highest loading statement (.923) was "Online friendships have had an impact on my real world life", indicating not only the importance of online friendships, but also their ability to change the offline player (albeit in an undefined sense). The final concept statement "The fact that MMOs are social environments where I can interact with other people is very important to me" had a loading of .404, and again emphasised the social nature of MMOs as relevant. The factor had a weak positive correlation with Factor one, indicating a meagre relationship between presenting the existing self and social interaction.

Overall, the second factor followed a typical pattern for remaining factors – that is, less loading statements with a substantial drop in variance explained. This factor had three loading statements and explained 6.34% of the variance, though with the .40 cut-off, all the loadings were still strong. Reliability statistics indicated a Cronbach's alpha of .780.

Factor Three: Gaming Aesthetics

Factor three related strongly to the visual look of the character as being important to the player, with qualitative evidence from the previous chapters indicating that this is critical in the way that some players present their version of self. The strongest concept statement with a loading of .939 was "The way my character looks in the game is very important to me", with two additional statements concerning character creation and gaming aesthetics. The lowest loading item, at .650, was "If I get a piece of equipment that doesn't look good on my character, I'll consider not using it", indicating both the strength of the loadings on the factor, but also that the impact of a character's look extends beyond the initial point of creation, through the life of the character. When looking at the other factors, it had a weak correlation with both factors one and two; the relationship between aesthetics and social interaction in particular was very

weak (.023), potentially indicating that aesthetics are more for the individuals own benefit, rather than impressing other people.

Overall, the third factor was similar to the second one, with fewer loading concept statements (than factor one) and reduced explained variance. This factor explained 5.16% of the variance, with a Cronbach's alpha of .843.

Factor Four: Presenting different sides of the self

Referencing a number of different concept statements, Factor four related to the presentation of an *alternative* version of self. The highest loading concept statement – "One reason I have multiple characters is because this enables me to explore different sides of my real world personality" had a loading of .703, whilst "MMOs allow me to act out parts of myself better than I can do in the real world" loaded at .634. There were six concept statements in total so indicating a well-supported factor, the weakest factor being a creditable .459 ("When I create a character, I think a lot about what they'll say about me as a player."). With two other statements concerning role play as a means of expressing hidden aspects of the self, this factor is an interesting contrast to the first factor, indicating that whilst the dominant factor in presentation the self is the existing offline self, that alternative versions are also present. This was also reflected in the factor correlation matrix, with a strong correlation (.501) being shown between the existing and different versions of self – indicating that present or actual (Higgins, 1987) and possible versions of self (Markus & Nurius, 1986) might be strongly entwined. There was also a moderate correlation between this factor and gaming aesthetics (.336), and emotional impact (.357), plus a weak correlation with social interaction (.286), indicating that ideas of different versions of self appear to be connected to many aspects of presenting the self overall. The factor explained 4.376% of the variance, and had a Cronbach's alpha of .793.

Factor Five: Emotional Impact

Though having only three concepts loading onto it, the fifth factor – Emotional Impact – clearly referred to the emotional effect of playing a MMO, with the strongest concept statement with a factor loading of .748 being "I am often emotionally affected by what happens in the game". With a second concept statement of "Thing that happen in the game can often have a strong emotional effect on me in real life" (0.625), and the

final concept statement being "Often other players influence how I feel whilst I'm playing" with a factor loading of .410, it is clear that MMOs can emotionally influence their players. The final factor is also interesting since it also references other players, so linking with factor two, indicating the strength of social elements in MMOs. Aside from gaming aesthetics, this factor showed a moderate correlation with all the other factors so, like factor four (Presenting Different Sides of the self), indicating its universal nature. This factor accounted for 4.122% of the variance, and had a Cronbach's alpha of .748.

Discussion

The EFA indicated that the presentation of self in MMOs was best represented by a five factor model with the factors of Presentation of the Existing self, Social Interaction, Gaming Aesthetics, Presenting different sides of the self, and Emotional Impact. These five factors were selected through a combined examination of parallel analysis results (Horn, 1965), of the factor and concept structure, plus eigenvalues and the associated scree plot (Cattell, 1978). The model accounted for 40.33% of the variance, with the factor correlation matrix indicating a number of satisfactory correlations between the factors themselves. However, the results of an EFA were provisional in nature, and as such required confirmation, so an additional CFA was run on the second half of the data set to establish if the five factor model was appropriate.

5.3.4 2nd Model – Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Theory

The first model, as developed through the qualitative studies, was not supported by the first CFA. However, a subsequent EFA established that a plausible fit could be found in the data, and that an alternative five factor model could provide a better theoretical explanation. This having been established and as with the first model, a CFA was the perfect choice for verifying the alternative five factor model as proposed through the EFA.

The Set of Models to be investigated

As with the first CFA, only one *a priori* model was tested in this CFA. However, since the aim of the second CFA was to confirm the proposed results of the EFA, this is entirely appropriate. As before however, there was the opportunity to make a number of post-hoc adjustments based on modification indices, and these have been included in the assessment of post-analytic models.

Sample

Following the recommendation of Fabrigar, Wegener, MacCallum and Strahan (1999) the CFA will be using the second half of the full data set, where the first half has been used for the EFA. As indicated in section 5.2.1, the split-sample data set of 204 participants met the requirements of Comrey and Lee (1992, in MacCallum et al., 1999) who argued that 200 participants is a fair sample size for a CFA. In addition, it had a subject-to-factor ratio of 40.8:1, which was substantially above the 20:1 ratio advocated by Arrindel and van der Ende (1985, in Kline, 2005), and a subject-to-variable ratio of 8.5, again well over the ratio of 5:1, as advised by Bryant and Yarnold (1995, in Garson, 2011). Demographics for the CFA sample, based on 203 participants, showed an average age of 26.52 years (SD=8.962), with a range from 18 to 68. 23.6% of the sample were female, and 76.4% male.

Estimates of the Model, and related matters

The same goodness of fit statistics were used to estimate the fit of the second model CFA as discussed in Table 5.13. In addition, maximum likelihood CFA was used again, as discussed in section 5.3.2.

Evaluation and Model Modification

The primary CFA model tested was that created during the preceding EFA phase; as before though, modification indices suggested by Mplus (Muthén & Muthén,

1998 - 2014) were used to adjust the model. The details of the models are shown below in Table 5.17.

- Model One: Original five factor model as developed through the EFA
- Model Four: This is the fourth iteration of model one with paths added as per modification indices suggestions made by Mplus. It is the first model where all fit indices indicated a good or acceptable fit. These alterations are listed below, with appendix X being referred to for details of the concept names:

  - Spontaneity_1 by Factor Presentation of the Existing Self
  - Offline Self_1 by Factor Social
  - Offline Self_4 by Social
  - Character Creation_2 with First Character_1
  - Role Play_1 with Multiple Characters_1

Table 5.0.17: Goodness of Fit indices for CFA Models 1 and 2

Item	Goodness-of-Fit	Model One	Model Four
Chi square ratio	Good < 2 Acceptable < 3 Not acceptable > 5	1.982	1.643
Df	N/A	242	237
P Value	N/A	.001	.001
RMSEA	Good < 0.05 Acceptable < 0.08 Marginal < 0.10 Bad > 0.10	.069 (.060 - .078)	.056 (.046 - .066)
CFI	Good > 0.90	.871	.917
Standardized RMR	Good < 0.05 Acceptable < 0.08	.066	.056
NNFI (TLI)	Acceptable > 0.90 Good > 0.95	.853	.904

Note: RMSEA, Root Mean Square of Approximation; CFI, Comparative Fit Index; SRMR, Standardized Root Mean Square residual; TLI (NNFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (Non-normed Fit Index).

Model One achieves a broadly acceptable fit with the data, when all of the fit indices are considered together, with the Chi Square Ratio, RMSEA, and SRMR all indicating a good or acceptable fit with the data. It must be acknowledged of course that the CFI and TLI fit indices don't achieve a good fit, and are more marginal in nature – although they are only .029, and .047 off a good and acceptable fit respectively.

Model Four achieves a good (or acceptable) fit across all measures and on first glance would appear to be a better choice for the mapping out the data set. However, the changes are *not* theoretically justifiable – for example, the addition of the concept statement OffSel_4 to Social would require the statement "I feel that at least one of my characters can represent the 'real' me" to be associated with "Friendships that I've made through MMOs are very important to me". Furthermore, two of the proposed changes (Character creation WITH First character, and Role play WITH Multiple characters) resulted in very low factor loadings (below .20) which indicated a tenuous link between the concept statement and factor. As a product of the modification indices proposing changes that were both theoretically indefensible, and that had very weak loadings, the first model (the model produced by the EFA) was adopted to explain the presentation of self in MMOs. The factor loadings for the model one are presented in Table 5.18.

As a reminder, the names allocated to the factors from the EFA were as follows – in table 5.18 below these are not included, purely for practical reasons of space:

1. Presentation of the Existing self
2. Social Interaction
3. Gaming Aesthetics
4. Presenting different sides of the self
5. Emotional Impact

Table 5.0.18: Standardized factor loadings for Model One (2nd CFA)

Item			Factor		
	1	2	3	4	5
My first 'proper' character contains many elements of what I see as 'myself'.	.781				
In the past when creating a character, I wanted him / her to resemble me – either physically or mentally.	.766				
When creating a character, I like them to show some of my real life beliefs and attitudes.	.743				
When creating a character, it is important to me that he / she contain some element (emotional, intellectual, spiritual, etc.) of 'me'.	.712				
I feel that at least one of my characters can represent the 'real' me.	.683				
With at least one of my characters, when I created him / her it was important that he / she looked like me as much as possible.	.571				
It is not important to me whether my character(s) represent me or not, the only reason I play is to have fun. (R)	.555				
I think that the way that I present myself in the game is a reflection of my real life identity.	.474				
Online friendships have had an impact on my real world life.		.783			
Friendships that I've made through MMOs are very important to me.		.749			
The fact that MMOs are social environments where I can interact with other people is very important to me.		.587			
When creating characters, I don't really think about their looks, what they say about me, etc. at all. (R)			.768		

When I create a character, the way they look is important to me.	.750	
The way my character looks in the game is very important to me.	.718	
If I get a piece of gear that doesn't look good on my character, I'll consider not using it.	.618	
The chance to express different aspects of myself through a game character(s) is very important to me.		.722
When I create a character, I think a lot about what they'll say about me as a player.		.651
One reason I have multiple characters is because this enables me to explore different sides of my real world personality.		.633
MMOs allow me to act out parts of myself better than I can do in the real world.		.611
If I engage in role play, I use it as a means of expressing different parts of my real world self – whether they are hidden aspects or those that I frequently show.		.591
The ability to role play a character in a MMO is very important to me.		.395
I am often emotionally affected by what happens in the game.		.824
Things that happen in the game can often have a strong emotional effect on me in real life.		.753
Often other players can influence how I feel whilst I'm playing.		.499

Note: Maximum Likelihood Extraction Method, Promax Rotation Method; all factor loadings were statistically significant (p < 0.01).

Table 5.0.19: Factor Matrix for Model One (2nd CFA)

	1	2	3	4	5
1					
2	.395				
3	.504	.167			
4	.715	.457	.706		
5	.432	.429	.381	.563	

Note: All factor correlations were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), except Aesthetics with Social (3 WITH 2).

Whilst there was an intention to create a path diagram for the CFA model, after a number of attempts to do so it became clear that it would contain a high number of variables (with their associated error variances), the five factors, plus loadings between all elements; this would have created an overly complex picture with 111 different elements that would have been unlikely to have helped the reader in understanding the model.

There are some differences between the factor loadings of the EFA and the CFA, but given natural variation in the data set this is to be expected. All but one of the factor loadings were confirmed as being over the original .40 cut off used in the EFA – "The ability to role play a character in a MMO is very important to me" had a loading of .395, but its proximity to the .4 cut-off and relevance to the factor would argue for its continued inclusion. As before, the factor matrix shown in table 5.19 indicated that there was a very strong correlation between factors 1 (Presentation of the Existing self) and 4 (Presenting Different Sides of the self). Again, there are some differences in correlation strengths, but their relative strengths remain the same as for the EFA.

Reliability

Reliability analyses were conducted on the factors, with Table 5.20 showing that all of the factors were reliable.

Table 5.0.20: Cronbach's Alpha for Model Four (2nd CFA)

Factors	Cronbach's Alpha
Presentation of the Existing self	.861
Social Interaction	.748
Gaming Aesthetics	.805
Presenting Different Sides of the self	.776
Emotional Impact	.717

Referencing Kline (2005) who argued that the reliability should be over .70, it can be seen that all the factors achieved this level. The calculation of Cronbach's alpha in SPSS also produced altered reliability figures were items to be removed from their respective factors. Table 5.21 shows these adjustments:

Table 5.0.21: Adjustments to Factor Statements and Impact on Cronbach's Alpha

Factor	Item	Adjusted Cronbach's Alpha
Presenting Different Sides of the self	*The ability to role play a character in a MMO is very important to me.*	.781
Emotional Impact	*Often other players can influence how I feel whilst I'm playing.*	.772

Factors four and five could potentially have improved Cronbach's alpha reliability ratings, but in neither case were these changes adopted. For 'Presenting Different Sides of the self' the removal of RolPla_2 ("The ability to role play a character in a MMO is very important to me") would have had a marginal benefit of .005, so rendering the change effectively pointless. For the factor 'Emotional Impact', there would be a .055 increase in reliability were SocEmo_1 ("Often other players influence how I feel whilst I'm playing") to be removed. However, with only three items loading onto this factor, this change was too risky, by producing a factor with only two loading items. Overall, the Cronbach's alpha for the 2nd model CFA factor were satisfactory, and no changes were made to the concept statements.

5.4 Discussion

In study three, the five factor qualitative model developed in studies one and two was tested, with two aims – first, of verifying the structure of the model, and second, of establishing whether the results potentially could be generalised. In this respect, it was the starting point of transforming the substantive theory that was created (Kearney, 1998), into a more formal one – although clearly this would have required the collection of data from different virtual environments (McCann & Clark, 2003).

Using the qualitative model as a template, a series of statements were created that drew from the properties of the model concepts in such a way that they captured the essence of that concept. For most concepts two statements were sufficient, but more complex ones, such as The Offline self or Character Creation, required three or more in order to encompass their various elements. Drawing participants from a number of online forums, the questionnaire was completed by 679 participants, but after removing those participants under 18, and non-completed data sets, 408 complete sets were acquired. Given that the questionnaire had been based on a theoretical model, a CFA was conducted on the data, given its intention to confirm or deny an existing theory (Kline, 2005). This analysis failed to support the qualitative model, either in its original form or, as a product of Mplus modification indices, in an altered configuration. As a consequence of this, the original model was abandoned, and an EFA was conducted on half of the data set, with a view to establishing a model that was statistically viable. Using parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) as a primary guide, but in conjunction with the scree plot (Cattell & Kline, 1977; 1978), a five factor model was deemed as being the most parsimonious and coherent model for the presentation of self in MMOs. Finally, a second CFA was conducted on the other half of the data, which supported the EFA model. In this situation the first model had a sufficiently good fit that modification indices were not employed – such data-driven alteration of a model without theoretical justification not being considered good practice (Kelloway, 1998). Subsequently, the five factor model of the presentation of self in MMOs was adopted, with Presentation of the Existing self, Social Interaction, Gaming Aesthetics, Presenting Different Sides of the self, and Emotional Impact as the conceptual categories.

It is noticeable that a significant number of the 'core' qualitative elements from the original model were represented in the final 2nd CFA model, and figure 5.2 below illustrates the commonalities:

Figure 5.2: Commonalities between Original Model and Final Model (2nd CFA)
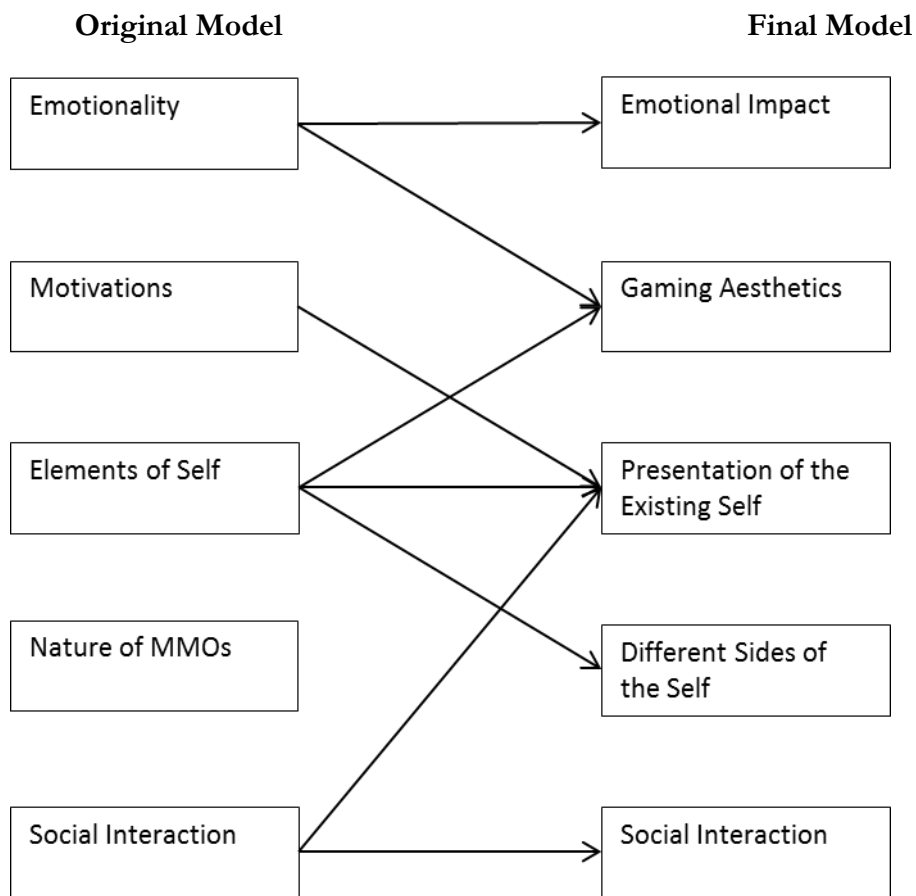

Figure 5.2 is constructed in such a way as to most clearly indicate the commonalities between the two models, but it is acknowledged that the main concepts (Elements of Self and Presentation of the Existing Self) will be addressed first in the examination of the models below.

It can be seen that the original central category of 'Elements of self' was arguably too complex, given that its concepts separated out into three different factors in the final model. There is a neat split in the concept statements relating to the existing or actual (Higgins, 1987) self and possible versions of self (Markus & Nurius, 1986), plus two statements("When creating characters, I don't really think about their looks, what they say about me, etc. at all" (Reversed) and "What I create a character, the way they look is important to me") relating more to the look of created characters have been moved into the factor of Gaming Aesthetics. This factor has been bolstered by two statements ("The way my character looks in the game is very important to me" and "If I get a piece of gear

that doesn't look good on my characters, I'll consider not using it") from the original factor Emotionality, which centred on character looks, whilst its three remaining factors created a new factor. The new factor 'Presentation of the Existing self' also received one loading statement ("It is not important to me whether my character(s) represent me or not, the only reason I play is to have fun") from the Motivations factor, but otherwise the original Motivations factor was left unrepresented in the new model. A similar pattern occurred with Social Interaction, which split in two – partially creating its own factor in the new model, but also contributing to the Presentation of the Existing self. Finally, Nature of MMOs, despite being an interesting and emotive topic in the Focus groups particularly, did not feature in the new model. This would indicate that whilst some players find the relationship between the online and offline worlds to be of interest, the majority give it no thought in relation to the presentation of self.

Given its status at the final thesis model, the overlap of the original qualitative and 2nd CFA models is discussed more extensively in the next chapter, together with a comprehensive review of its place in the existing literature – although a brief assessment is presented below.

With the core factor of the CFA being identified as the Presentation of the Existing self, there is a case for interpreting the presentation of self in MMOs through the lens of the Self Memory System (Conway, 2005; Williams et al., 2007). With a number of authors noting the tendency for people to replicate or draw from their offline self (Back et al., 2010; Bargh et al., 2002; Boudreau, 2013; Lampe et al., 2008), it is arguable that many players draw from their autobiographical memory and self-schemas (Markus, 1977) to create a version of self, although it is acknowledged that some concealment or exaggeration of traits might occur (Chester, 2004b; Zhao et al., 2008). This is reinforced by the concept statements, with the strongest loading statement referring to first characters as being placeholders for the self (Wang et al., 2009), and others referencing characters as exhibiting the players beliefs and attitudes.

With the second factor being Social Interaction, the idea of the self as being a process is also given more weight, with the work of Goffman (1959) being valuable. With literature identifying both MMOs (Gee, 2005; Nardi & Harris, 2006; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006) and other virtual spaces (Jung et al., 2007; Papacharissi, 2002a; Viégas, 2005) as a place to socialise, it is unsurprising that it features prominently in this model.

Concepts statements referred specifically to the role of friendships within the game as being important, together with the role of MMOs as social environments.

The third factor, Gaming Aesthetics, was an amalgam of two different core concepts in the original model but is substantiated by previous literature; this identified that (across a number of virtual spaces) not only do people like to create and control the appearance of their characters (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Fron et al., 2007; Schroeder, 2002; Turkay & Adinolf, 2010), but that the flow of information to other people is carefully monitored (Binder et al., 2009; Dorethy et al., 2014; Suler, 2008). There were four concept statements that loaded onto factor, two of which related to the straight aesthetic look of the character, whilst the highest loading factor drew upon aspects of the self. Interestingly, the last statement related to gear worn by the character, perhaps drawing upon the study two idea of 'coolness' as an important factor. Players, both for their own pleasure but also with respect to showing off to other people (self-promotion - Jones & Pittman, 1982).

The fourth factor – presenting different sides of the self – indicated that whilst the replication of the existing self was the driving force behind the presentation of self in MMOs, there was space for alternate versions of self as well. Drawing from the idea of the self as a Structure, the impact of the working memory (Markus & Wurf, 1987) can be seen, in the creation of alternate versions of self, such as the actual and ideal (Higgins, 1987; Markus & Nurius, 1986). There is evidence from a number of virtual spaces supporting this idea (Bessière et al., 2007; Demetrovics et al., 2011; Gilbert et al., 2014; Herring et al., 2005). Reassuringly, six statements loaded onto this factor, indicating a degree of validity within it – also supported by the Cronbach's alpha of .776. The highest loading statement referred to the chance to express different aspects of the self, with other statements also referring to the social element of presenting a version of self, and the value of multiple characters.

Lastly, the fifth factor – emotional impact of playing MMOs – was identified in the model, supporting existing research that has identified both social and personal motivational aspects to the presentation of self in virtual environments (Baumeister, 1982; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Frostling-Henningson, 2009; Higgins, 1987; Jung et al., 2007; Taylor, 2003). With three concept statements, there was a clear reference to emotional elements of playing and again, as with factor four, some

reference to social parts of the game with the concept statement "Often other players can influence how I feel whilst I'm playing".

The study has made an original contribution to the literature through both the topic chosen, and the methodology employed. Whilst there has been literature looking at why people express versions of self in MMOs (Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Yee, 2006b), and how they see their gaming characters in relation to themselves (Bessière et al., 2007), there has been no literature looking expressly at the structure and process of the presentation of self in MMOs.

5.4.1 Study Reflexivity

Whilst quantitative research has fewer inherent points of subjective influence than qualitative research, it would be erroneous to think that quantitative research is entirely objective, and that the researcher has no overt influence. In the course of creating, running, and analysing study three I have made a series of decisions which, although they can be justified, have in themselves shaped the end result of the analysis.

Aside from the construction of the qualitative model, which contained elements of subjective interaction, deciding which concepts to include in the questionnaire intrinsically altered the data set that would be required. The inclusion of concepts was predicated on the uniqueness of each variable, and the evidence supporting it, so establishing validity in the questionnaire, supported by a reasoned strategy. However, the process was subjective in nature and could potentially have skewed the data acquired – although the rigour of the above strategy should potentially have minimised any such concerns. In constructing the questionnaire itself, there was the risk of constructing concept statements or the structure of the questionnaire itself (i.e. question ordering, etc.) in such a way that might produce biased results, however such risks were reduced in the pre-testing stage when two participants talked through the questionnaire. Finally, in the data collection phase, there is the possibility that my acquisition of participants was flawed, such that only one population was sampled, leading to a valid set of results for that population, but which could not be generalised any further. However, a concerted effort was made to recruit participants through a varied range of virtual spaces, and across a spectrum of MMOs (not merely the largest and most popular ones).

However, it was in the analysis of the data, particularly with a technique as esoteric as factor analysis that the greatest possibility for skewing the data existed. For both EFA and CFA, a number of decisions must be made that can alter the final outcome. For EFA, the most important decision lies in how many factors to extract for the final model – whilst there are a number of methods (e.g. - Scree plot, Cattell, 1978; Eigenvalues, Guttman, 1954; Parallel Analysis, Horn, 1965), the two most common (Eigenvalues over 1, and the 'bend' of a scree plot) are notoriously subjective. Kaiser's criterion (Guttman, 1954) has been criticised for being seen as an absolute rule, not a recommended upper limit (Hayton et al., 2004), with a cut-off point that is relatively arbitrary (Fabrigar et al., 1999). On the basis of these criticisms then, parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) was chosen given its more methodologically robust and justifiable approach; but, as is seen in section 5.3.3, some element of subjective assessment still occurs since, as with eigenvalues or scree plots, it is not an absolute cut-off. Other decisions made in EFA that can have an effect on the final outcome are the cut-off point for factor loadings, and the decision as to what factors represent.

In this study, existing protocols for the cut-off point for factor loadings were used (Kline, 2005), so reducing my subjective input. However, in deciding what each variable cluster represented, there was the risk of subjective manipulation – in this case, as will be seen, I went back to the qualitative model, and allowed the existing structures therein to guide my assessment of the features of EFA factors.

In CFA the point of subjective interaction comes after the model has been tested, given a need to consider whether the model is an accurate representation of the underlying population data set. Here, considerations such as the validity of the fit indices, use of the modification indices, and if or when to discard an unsuccessful model are more relevant. The first of these, the validity of the fit indices, can be guided by research (e.g. Bentler, 1990a; Hu & Bentler, 1999) recommending cut-off points, but the choice of which indices to employ, and how they mesh with other indices (to create a coherent and valid representation of the overall fit) has to be negotiated by the researcher. In this study I chose to employ a number of indices across different standards (e.g. absolute and comparative fit indices), such that no single index was taken as proof of the quality of the CFA fit. In this way, a rigorous methodology was employed that reduced any bias I might have in my interpretation of the results.

However, if the model does not quite fit, there is the choice of using modification indices with the aim of achieving an acceptable or good fit. Generally, researchers must be very careful not to make changes that are not supported by the theoretical model (Kline, 2002; 2005) but, to a degree, such changes might be acceptable. Again, this is a subjective decision and one that may allow skewing of the data analysis process. This study utilised a number of approaches when trying to achieve a good fit for the CFA models, including the use of modification indices, and discarding the model completely when it became clear that it was insufficient in matching the data.

5.5 Chapter Summary

In conclusion, this chapter has reported on the creation, implementation and analysis of a quantitative study, which formed the third and final study of the thesis. Utilising a mixed methods design, the questionnaire was based on a series of concept statements drawn from a model developed in Studies One and Two.

Given that there was a theoretical model for the presentation of self in MMOs, a CFA was run on the data which failed to support fully the initial model, with goodness-of-fit indices indicated a poor fit at best. Through the use of modification indices, a number of alterations were made but the model failed to achieve an acceptable fit on any iteration, until such time that internal consistency warnings invalidated the model being produced.

At this stage, an EFA was conducted on the first half of the data, which produced an alternative five factor model. To test this new model, a CFA was run on the second half of the data, with an acceptable fit being found for the model. The use of modification indices was mooted to improve the model fit, but since there was no theoretical justification for the changes, the CFA model was left untouched. Comparison showed that there is substantial similarities between the original Five Factor model and the final five Factor model; it was concluded that breaking down the concept Elements of self in the original model might well have created a model which would have been acceptable.

In the final chapter of the thesis, the final five factor model is discussed with reference to existing theory and literature, limitations addressed, and implications and future research considered.

Chapter Six: Discussion

6.1 Chapter Introduction

The final chapter of the thesis draws together the threads of the thesis and assesses the viability of the models produced, their impact on existing knowledge, and addresses issues of thesis originality, limitations, implications and suggestions for future research. In the following section the research questions are reconsidered, and the original qualitative and final five factor models are discussed, to assess the viability of both models. This is followed by assessing the impact of the research on the existing literature, and revisiting the research questions to review their status.

Having evaluated the standing of the research questions, the original contribution of the thesis is outlined, followed by an examination of the limitations of the thesis and reflexivity on the research process. Lastly, before the chapter summary, implications of the thesis and suggestions for future research are outlined.

6.2 Thesis Overview

The thesis consisted of three studies designed to answer the research questions, both at the level of individual responses and to see if the model developed was applicable across a broader population. The core of the thesis model was developed during Study one, through the application of grounded theory analysis on 29 interviews. This was further developed by the thematic analysis of data gathered in an asynchronous focus group. These two qualitative studies produced a five factor model for the construction of self in MMOs. Finally, in the third study, an online questionnaire gathered data from 408 participants with the purpose of testing the model.

The initial questionnaire results were tested using CFA, which revealed that the Five Factor model was not a sufficiently good fit for the data; despite attempts to enable a fit through the use of the Mplus modification indices (Muthén & Muthén, 1998 - 2014), optimal fit was not established, and the model was therefore rejected. An EFA was completed on the first half of the data (Kelloway, 1998), which produced an alternative five factor model.

Following this, a CFA was run on the second half of the data, which validated the model as an acceptable fit for the data – with the decision being made not to alter the

model through the use of modification indices due to a lack of theoretical justification. A notable difference between the models was the separation of the Core category 'Elements of self' from the original model into three separate factors in the alternate five factor model.

6.2.1 Presentation of self in MMOs

As discussed in chapter Five, the original qualitative model developed in studies one and two was rejected, in favour of an alternative five factor model which was created using EFA, and verified using CFA. The final factors were Presentation of the Existing self, Social Interaction, Gaming Aesthetics, Presentation of the desired eslf, and Emotional Impact, in descending order of explained variance.

Looking at the overall model, it can be seen that the self is very much at the core of presentation of self in MMOs, as might be expected – whether as the existing self, or in an alternate version. This relates closely to existing research on the self, as is discussed in the next section, but also to the idea of the self as being a Structure. However, also relevant is the idea of the self as being a Process, which is more closely related to the second factor Social Interaction. It is this idea of the self as being both a Structure, and a Process that can accommodate the various elements within the five factor model. This is because there is no coherent logic in thinking of the self purely as something which resides within the mind – for how is the 'self' to be imparted to others? Similarly, the self cannot be purely a process, because there must be something to transmit to other people – without a permanent self, what is communicated to others? The model adopted reflects both of these positions, since it argues that when presenting a version of self in MMOs, players will both draw upon a version of self, and interact with other people in such a way that communicates this self.

Comparing the original qualitative model and the final one adopted, it is apparent that in the transition from the idiographic plain to a nomothetic one, a substantial amount of detail has been dropped. Arguably, the former model was too complex, resulting in the parsing off of irrelevant material. However, it must be remembered that factor analysis aims to reduce the complexity of a data set, by revealing those factors that lie behind the surface data. So, whilst five factors have been selected as modelling the

presentation of self in MMOs, there are substantial individual or even group variations which are still valid.

6.2.2 Revisiting the Research Questions

In Chapter Two, having looked at literature on the presentation of self in MMOs, the research questions for the thesis were outlined. They were as follows:

1. How do gamers use MMOs to present concepts of self?
2. If the gamer engages in creating version of self, why do they do so?
3. For those who do not engage in such activities, why do they not do so?
4. For those that do present a version of self in MMOs, what impact does it have on their daily offline lives?

1. How do gamers use MMOs to present concepts of self?

The thesis model argues that players use their characters to present versions of self, most typically in recreating existing versions of self (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Waggoner, 2009). For some players the opportunity is taken to create new versions of self, most typically with reference to a specific class or race. Whether presenting an existing version of self, or creating a new one, the individual must access his existing self-schema (Markus, 1977) plus associated other schemas that are representative of the autobiographical memory (Barsalou, 1988) , and the self memory system (Conway, 2005). This was represented by the first factor in the five factor model, which specifically identified the offline self as being a template for versions of self within the game. Typically, the versions of self presented were the Actual or the Ideal (Higgins, 1987), suggesting that MMOs are a virtual space free from pressures to conform, as might be exhibited by players creating 'ought' versions of self. The act of interacting with other people relies upon various strategies, with self-promotion and competence being common, as was intimidation in PvP situations (Jones & Pittman, 1982). Drawing from the symbolic interactionist approach (Mead, 1934), the player receives feedback from other people as to whether the version of self has been accepted – potentially directly, as might be seen in SNS through comments or photos, but in MMOs likely through less

direct means. Players may provide advice and criticism, make permanent 'friends' with someone in the game, etc. and through these means, provide indirect feedback to the individual.

There are moments of high intensity activity when active thought goes into the version of self to be presented, such as when creating a character (Bryant & Akerman, 2009; Yee, 2006b), but generally the presentation of self is a pre-attentive cognitive activity which utilises well-known 'identity paths' and pre-established roles (Goffman, 1961). The aesthetics of the character are particularly important here, as identified by Ducheneaut et al. (2009), as it represents the 'face' of the presentation and the indicator of the progression of both the character and, indirectly, the player (Yee, 2006a).

2. If the gamer engages in creating version of self, why do they do so?

A fundamental reason for why players engage in these activities lies in the affordances provided by the space itself. The interplay between the psychological and environmental elements of a MMO (Oyserman & Markus, 1993; Stein & Markus, 1996), can enable players to move beyond their offline versions of self. The avatar provides a means to exist *in* the game (Whalen et al., 2003), where the gamer is in control of the character (Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010), and can do impossible things (Boellstorff, 2008). Furthermore, with no association to reality players can be anything they want to be without, as Binder et al. {{842 Binder, Jens 2009/a;}} said, 'conflicting social spheres' meaning that someone will be able to see undesired information. To an extent there is less of a distinction between information 'given' and that 'given off' (Goffman, 1959), although this point cannot be extended too far. The status of whether information is actively or passively acquired is as much dependent on the perceiver as it is on the target individual. Aside from presenting a version of self because the space affords them the opportunity, the model also indicates that players are strongly motivated to play because of the social interaction, with the second factor of the CFA model indicating it as being relevant. In addition, several members of both the interviews and focus groups talked of their Guild friends being the primary reason for playing the game.

Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000) can also provide some insight into why players use MMOs – with the three elements of the theory all potentially being sated in-game. MMOs enable the player to create a version of self that is completely within her control, can engage in a variety of activities that can

showcase her abilities, and that allows social engagement from the most superficial to intimate of levels (affordances of the environment allowing). In this respect, the autonomy, competence, and relatedness aspects of the theory are all met (Przybylski et al., 2010).

3. For those who do not engage in such activities, why do they not do so?

With respect to those that do not engage in the presentation of self in MMOs, beyond their offline version of self, it may be that the natures of the MMOs themselves have a critical role to play in the presentation of self. In so much as affordances are aspects of the environment that can enable or hinder the presentation of self (Clark & Uzzell, 2006; Gibson, 1977), it is also true that the individual brings affordances to the space. If the player is incapable of seeing the virtual environment as somewhere where an alternate version of self can be created, then the question of why they do not engage in such activities is rendered obsolete. Research from SL indicated that users who saw a blurred boundary between the online and offline environments, were less likely to have separate versions of self, again supporting the idea of the virtual environment as not being seen as different, or providing any opportunities (McLeod & Leshed, 2011).

Linking to the concept of the Frames (Goffman, 1974), the question is whether the individual sees the MMO environment as a different space where a special category of actions can occur, or simply as an extension of the existing offline one. This question does need further examination, given that some players were aware of the difference, but still chose to replicate their offline self. It is speculated that for such gamers, there was simply no psychological need to engage in such activities.

4. For those that do present a version of self in MMOs, what impact does it have on their daily offline lives?

Factor five of the CFA indicated that there can be emotional impact to playing MMOs, with the role of friendships in particular as being important. Moreover, in the act of playing the MMO, there must be some feedback to the player – both in the form of recorded experiences (Belk, 2013) with the game world itself, but also in the creation of new autobiographical memories (Baumeister, 1982) that will influence both the existing self-schemas (Markus, 1977), and new working memory goals. As such, there are a

number of 'invisible' but continuous points of impact from presenting versions of self within MMOs – where the player changes as a product of the interaction. The concept of the *bricoleur* is particularly apt here, since in the process of presenting a version of self, the individual is changed by that action. There was also evidence to suggest that there visible benefits as well, with the study one interviews indicating a number of players learning new skills, or improving their self-esteem, etc. through the use of MMOs.

6.2.3 Integration with Existing Knowledge

In discussing how the thesis integrates with existing knowledge, two factors bear further consideration – first, it is acknowledged that the qualitative model developed was substantive in nature (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and not designed to be applied to non-MMO virtual spaces. Whilst reference is made to spaces such as SL, SNS, homepages, and blogs, any position taken is necessarily speculative in nature and would need to be confirmed through the development of a formal model. Second, whilst the qualitative model was not supported by the quantitative study, this does not invalidate it in its own right – it merely asserts that the specific configuration of the model does not apply to the general population. In addition, throughout the thesis there has been reference to the idea of the self as being best conceptualised as being both a structure, and a process. This has been done in an attempt to align theories of the self which focus on cognitive and affective elements (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Williams et al., 2007), and those that seek to represent the self as interaction with others (Goffman, 1959; Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984).

The benefits of the dual element conceptualisation of the self becomes apparent when considering the five factor model developed through the final CFA; certain factors lend themselves more easily to explanation with reference to the structures of the self, and others to the processes. However, two things must be considered when considering the self – first, that clearly there is no separation of the self in real terms, but that, in computational terms, there are numerous feedback loops and connexions that link the structure and the process. Most important in all of these is the feedback that is acquired through the act of presenting the self, and which is fed back into the structural elements. Second, that when considering how players engage in the presentation of self in MMOs, that players are free to pick whichever elements of the model as they fit, making sense on

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a personal level. As such, whilst one player may draw strongly on the concepts of replicating the existing self with strong social ties, another may be interested in creating a different version of self, with particular emphasis on the looks of her character.

The CFA model indicated that the most influential element in presenting a version of self in MMOs is the desire to present an existing version of self. This finding concurs with research into a number of other virtual spaces (Boudreau, 2013), with literature suggesting that some players prefer to play what they already know (O'Brien, 1999). Early Internet research into websites and Usenet groups found that users tended to play out honest (actual) versions of self during interactions (Bargh et al., 2002; McKenna & Bargh, 2000), although there could be some concealment and exaggeration of traits (Chester, 2004a; Zhao et al., 2008). This trend was repeated in other virtual spaces, with research into social networking sites finding that people tended to create an accurate representation of their offline self (Aas et al., 2010), typically drawing off past versions of their self (Boudreau, 2013).

This finding was also supported by research into Second Life, which found replication of the offline self (Messinger, Ge, Stroulia, Lyons, & Smirnov, 2008), with O'Brien (1999) arguing that users were generally limited by their corporeal experience. This was supported by research showing that 84% of SL users had human avatars, of which 56% were replicating the offline user (Linares et al., 2011). The qualitative model of this thesis also showed that for some players, there is simply no desire to play anything that is not human, or indeed anything that didn't fall within normal conceptualisations of 'attractive'. Finally, the thesis results have been supported by research into MMOs, with a number of researchers noting the strong influence of the self (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Ducheneaut et al., 2009; Waggoner, 2009).

However, it is interesting that more players do not take up the opportunity to experiment with the presentation of different sides of the self in MMO, or SL. In SNS a significant amount of information is other-generated and linked to the real world (Stefanone et al., 2008), so that the friends of the individual can tell if someone is lying or not (Wilson et al., 2012). This creates the risk that unless the individual takes great pains to keep the respective target audiences separate, there is the risk of overlapping social spheres, where other people are able to see aspects of the individual which were not intended for them (Binder et al., 2009; Goffman, 1959). However, this is not a risk in MMOs or SL where by default there is no overlap between the online and offline worlds

– players can be whomever or whatever they want, without risk of their presentation of self being jeopardised (Goffman, 1959).

Clearly, in replicating a version of their offline self, players must be accessing some element of themselves, since there must be a template to draw from. The work on self-schemas (Markus, 1977) is valuable here, since they are the structural elements of the autobiographical memory (Barclay & Subramaniam, 1987; Brewer, 1986) and this, as Pillemer (1992) argued has directive, self, and communicative functionality. It is also an instrumental part of the Self Memory system (Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Conway, 2005; Williams et al., 2007), together with the working memory, and in this way regulates access to memories, and the goals of the working memory. When creating a character players go to their closest frame of reference for an 'identity' – themselves, and using the activated template from the self-schema, reproduce what they already know. Such a route to creating a character would be both the easiest way of imbuing it with an element of presence, and also the most emotionally pleasing since there would be no dissonance with the current self. As Higgins (1987) argued, dissonance between states of self can be a motivating factor, so it follows that recreating the self in the game should be the smoothest emotional process. Having created a new virtual self from the old, the act of playing out this character would be sub-conscious act since there would be no reason to activate the phenomenal self (Jones & Gerard, 1967). In turn, experiences in the virtual environment are fed back into the autobiographical memory, and thereby change the network of memories that exist, the self-schema that they relate to, and subsequently the management of goals developed by the working memory. In this way, there is a coherent and logical route from the autobiographical memory, through to the creation and playing of a replica version of the self in the MMO, and back to the memory – in many ways a simulacra of normal, offline, existence. Again, it is interesting here that despite the fantastical world inhabited, for many players the offline self is so powerful as to be the default version of self chosen.

The second factor in the five factor model was social interaction, and in many respects this lends itself more easily to self as being a process, where the structural self is performed for the audience. Again, one must remember however that this split is in function only, since every player is continually creating and prioritising new presentation of self goals (Leary & Kowalski, 1990; Leary, 1996), accessing existing memories from the self-schema of autobiographical memory (Pillemer, 1992), and presenting the desired

version of self (Goffman, 1959). It is a continuous feedback loop, where the self is both structure and process, with each element informing and influencing the other. In both the interviews and focus groups, participants referenced other people, with other players in the game being seen as analogous to offline friends, and offline friendships being established. It supports a self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) interpretation for why people play MMOs, with the autonomy element of the choice of which self to present being complimented by the choice of who to engage with. It is a meshing of the working self-concept aspect of the self as structure with the choice of audience that represents the self as the process, with literature supporting the idea of socialisation as being a motivation to play MMOs (Frostling-Henningson, 2009; Fuster et al., 2012; Lin & Lin, 2011; Nardi & Harris, 2006).

Research into other types of virtual spaces supports the thesis argument that social contact is a priority in online interaction – with websites (Jung et al., 2007; Kim et al., 2012; Papacharissi, 2002a; Papacharissi, 2002b), blogs (Mewburn & Thomson, 2013; Stefanone & Jang, 2007; Viégas, 2005), and SNS (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012; Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Stefanone et al., 2008) all being associated with communication with others. MMOs too have been analysed for their potential in this area (Gee, 2005; Nardi & Harris, 2006; Pearce, 2006), with their being identified as a 'third place' to socialise, away from either home or work contexts (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Aided by the inherent anonymity of MMOs and lack of a requirement for physical proximity, players can socialise with whomever they like, without the risk of other-generated material (Rui & Stefanone, 2013; Stefanone et al., 2008) subverting the version of self they wish to portray (Besmer & Lipford, 2010; Ramirez Jr & Walther, 2009). Furthermore, people will often seek to avoid socially embarrassing situations and give others a degree of latitude in the version of self being presented (Goffman, 1959). This means that the presentation of self in MMOs has even more flexibility, since there is little risk of being called out. This does not apply to all environments however, with PvP and raid environments typically being more openly critical.

The third factor of the model for the presentation of self in MMOs was gaming aesthetics, with research supporting the importance of avatar looks (Schroeder, 2002). Within the qualitative studies, participants spoke of the desire to replicate their offline looks, even across a range of characters, with hair in particular as being important – a point also noted by Ducheneaut et al. {{460 Ducheneaut, Nicolas 2009/a;}}. Bearing in

mind the point that most players do not look directly at the faces of other players, it is hypothesised that hair is important because, as seen from the screenshots in appendix 1, this is what the player will see when controlling their character. So, although there is evidence to suggest that players will spend considerable periods of time customizing their characters (Neustaedter & Fedorovskaya, 2009; Turkay & Adinolf, 2010), and the control of the character looks as being important for game enjoyability (Bailey et al., 2009), players will not see the benefit of their actions for the majority of the time. This suggests that the importance of character aesthetics is manifested more through the imbued meaning, rather than the actual appearance – players know what their character looks like and that's the important thing, even if they cannot actually see the aspects that are important to them. This is an interesting point, since it infers that aesthetics, which might be seen as the most overt demonstration to other players, is not necessarily so. Instead, as Conway {{682 Conway, Martin A. 2005;}} identified, imagery is important in the autobiographical memory, and it may be that the important of the aesthetic look of the character is more strongly linked to a visual imprint or marker with the relevant schema.

Research into other virtual spaces supports the concept of aesthetics as being important, with SNS in particular having received attention. Suler (2008) noted that photos were a good informal way to express the self, with the tagging (Dorethy et al., 2014) and untagging (Binder et al., 2009) of photos as having been identified as ways of filtering information about the self.

Whilst the factor with the greatest variance did relate to the presentation of the existing self, the desire to present a different version of self did manifest itself in the model. Within the qualitative data, there were multiple examples of players creating ideal versions of self, such as Lauren who spoke about creating a druid who could represent the pro-nature aspects of her offline self. This was a finding by Bessière et al. {{274 Bessière, K. 2007/a;}} and Ducheneaut et al. {{460 Ducheneaut, Nicolas 2009/a;}} in MMOs, and {{887 Gilbert, Richard L. 2014}} in SL, however it contrasted to earlier research by Bargh et al. {{194 Bargh, John A. 2002/a;}}. The Bargh et al. research was looking at message board interaction however, and it may well be that the differences in the virtual spaces facilitated the presentation of a certain type of self over another. Research has shown that the extent of identity exploration is a significant predictor of changes in the number of possible selves created (Dunkel, 2000), and it is suggested that

the MMO, with its fantastic environment and opportunities to be new roles, is likely to induce a greater degree of exploration of the self.

The creation of different aspects of the self is driven by the self-schemata (Markus, 1977), together with related schema for associated concepts, however it is experiencing schema-incongruent information that change can be made (Hastie, 1981). Whilst schemas are normally created through the process of schematization (Barclay, 1986), where the repetition of schema-congruent experiences builds a cognitive map, it is the unusual experience that receive more attention. The creation of a new self within a MMO, capable of fighting dragons, and dual-wielding swords would certainly come under that bracket, and might explain the motivational impact of MMOs – they can allow people to create new, possible versions of self (Markus & Nurius, 1986). It might well be that people are motivated by the desire to be better, by having experienced that better self already - drawing on Higgin's (1987) ideal self concept. The Michelangelo effect (Rusbult et al., 2009) argued that the ideal self can be affirmed by another person, resulting in a permanent movement towards that ideal self. It is proposed that when playing a MMO, this effect can occur, but towards the online self. If the character in the game is enjoyable to play, well received by other players, and fulfils the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs as dictated by self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), then it might well be a possible self that the player would like to become, and would actively work to achieving. As a consequence, the Michelangelo effect can explain the power of the ideal self in MMOs, by seeing a different version of ourselves that is successful and accepted, and are likely to move towards it. In a strange way, the player becomes in the offline space, what he / she already is in the online one.

The emotional impact of playing MMOs was also identified by the model, with the concepts statements addressing the offline impact of playing. Curiously, escapism did not feature in the final model, despite featuring heavily in the qualitative studies with a strong response across both studies. However, there is literature evidencing the impact of playing MMOs on the offline life of the user – with avatar experiences being integrated into the offline concept of self (Hefner et al., 2007; Taylor, 2003), gaming experiences helping players to overcome offline mental health difficulties (Pearce, 2006), and the development of offline friendships (Holtz & Appel, 2011),

6.3 Thesis Originality

Following the criteria of Phillips and Pugh (2006), this thesis has established its originality across a number of criteria. In particular, originality has been shown with respect to three standards – first, in developing a model for the presentation of self in MMOs, something not achieved before, second, in contributing to the theoretical literature through the application of the self as structure and process conceptualisation, and third, in using a mixed-method approach..

The thesis presents a unique model for the presentation of self in MMOs, with a focus on the elements that make up self-presentation. There has been research looking at the motivations to play MMOs (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Yee, 2006b) which has some overlap, as has research looking at self-concept (Jin, 2010) or role-playing (Williams et al., 2011) but there are no works looking at this specific topic. In terms of theoretical originality, the thesis is also making an original contribution. The application of the Self Memory (Conway, 2005) system to the presentation of self in MMOs is unique, together with the proposal of the self as being both a structure, and a process. Together with the work of Goffman (1959) and related researchers (Jones & Pittman, 1982; Tedeschi & Melburg, 1984) a logical and coherent foundation for the thesis has been established.

Finally, the thesis has used a variety of methods, in the execution of a mixed methods design. Based on the arguments presented by Green et al. (1989) the methodology has benefitted from two qualitative and one quantitative method, serving to both triangulate and extend the data set. Aside from the use of mixed methods, given the originality of the thesis topic, this also represents the first time such methods have been applied to these research questions. Overall, this thesis has shown originality in its research questions, the theoretical approaches addressed and in the methods used.

6.4 Limitations of the Thesis

Overall the thesis has been conducted in an intelligent, rigorous manner, though not without its criticisms, that have lain entirely within the methodological application and analysis. In this respect the theoretical framework and conclusions have been fully substantiated.

6.4.1 Study One

The use of one-to-one interviews was seen as appropriate for the purposes of gathering data on the presentation of self in MMOs, and in this regard there are no criticisms to be made. However, some of the email interviews were not as interactive as would have been optimal, with limited engagement with the participants after the original questions had been answered. This was primarily due to a failure to establish this as a regular part of the data collection cycle, but also due to an over-eagerness on the part of the author to collect data from more participants.

Within the synchronous interviews, there was much more in-depth questioning but, after having read the interviews again, key points were identified where probes could have been used to gain better data. This is part of the skill of interviewing, and something that could be improved with further practice. The method of having online interviews did have a tendency to produce slightly 'bitty' data however, which was problematic in terms of getting sufficient material to analyse. In this respect, there is a trade-off in online interviews between getting an instinctive response, against the possibility that the response will be rather short. This did not occur for all participants, but warrants close monitoring in further research.

The use of grounded theory was a justified choice, with one of its strengths being in areas where little information is known, so in this respect it was the perfect choice for the first study analysis. Within the analysis itself, several iterations of the analysis occurred with successive improvement across each one – with increased memo writing, abstractions of concepts, and creation of relationships. Even at the time of the first analysis, there was also a limited amount of synchronous data collection and analysis but in future research, data collection, analysis and, if necessary, the asking of secondary questions, would be more fully integrated.

In terms of the conclusions drawn from the grounded theory data, they are grounded in the theory and represent an accurate portrayal of self-presentation in MMOs.

6.4.2 Study Two

The use of a focus group was an effective means of collecting qualitative data and was suitable as the methodology for study two – achieving both the primary aim of getting data to support the study one model, and the secondary one of gaining a group perspective on the issue.

There were some problems in its application though, as previously acknowledged. In the group there were a number of group members who did not take part. However, on the system used (Facebook) it could not be established whether the group members ever logged into the group, so potentially changing their status from non-participants to true non-attendees. It had been assumed, erroneously, that participants who had been briefed on the topic of conversation and having volunteered to take part would have engaged in discussion. Whilst no active group members complained and there were no ethical ramifications due to the confidentiality that had been established at the start of the group, it would obviously have been better had all group members taken part.

One issue that had not been anticipated concerned Facebook being able to use the data for their own purposes, although this would have been unlikely. Whilst all users had technically waived all rights in their data when they signed the terms and conditions of Facebook, it is acknowledged that this issue could have been pointed out to the group members.

In the future, the issue of data use and non-attendance / participation could be negated by holding the focus group in a custom forum. This would allow for the easier tracking of participants – not merely their attendance, but also forum posts and frequency of posting, etc. As a product of the reduced participants, it is felt that not all of the benefits of focus groups were accrued; however, as with more effective interviewing, it is anticipated that this is a skill which will develop with further practice.

The thematic analysis conducted on the focus group data was appropriate for the study, particularly given the pre-existing grounded theory data. Its application was seen as rigorous and correct, and the conclusions drawn fully justified.

6.4.3 Study Three

The use of online questionnaires was an excellent way of collecting data for study three, with the advertising across multiple MMO forums meaning that participants were recruited from a range of different games. Other inherent advantages meant that there were participants across different geographical locales, and that any individual using the forums could potentially have taken part.

In terms of the analysis used, factor analysis has been argued as being appropriate for the task in hand, with evidence shown to prove that both the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses were conducted with rigour. There was one issue however, concerning the degree of missing data – over 200 participants had to be removed from the incomplete data sets that could not be imputed. This represented almost one third of the original data set and raises questions concerning the ease with which the questionnaire could be completed.

However, research has shown that completion rates for email questionnaires can be lower than postal questionnaires, particularly in a student population (LaRose & Tsai, 2014), with one commercial website reporting general completion rates between 26.09% and 100%, with an average of 84.75% (Hamilton, 2013). Given that 44.7% of the study three population were students, the degree of missing data from the dataset is entirely in keeping with the existing literature.

6.4.4. General

Aside from study specific limitations, there are two thesis level points to consider. First, not all the research questions have been answered in the same depth. Research question three (For those who do not engage in such activities, why do they not do so?) could have been addressed further, and will be addressed in future research.

Secondly, the thesis questions specifically addressed MMOs, and not other virtual spaces such as SNS or SL. This has meant that a direct comparison to the presentation of self in such spaces cannot be made, and so reducing the generalizability of the thesis results. However, this was not the intention of the qualitative studies, since the intention was to create a substantive theory for the presentation of self, specific to MMOs. It would not have been possible to have included SL users in the third study either, since

the creation of the concept statements was implicit on their application to a MMO, and not another virtual environment.

Having created a five factor model through the factor analysis, it may be entirely possible to create a form of the questionnaire that could be applied to all virtual environments, and this will undoubtedly be the foundation for a future piece of work.

An associated consideration is whether the thesis model is applicable across different cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Without knowing which country participants came from, it is difficult to establish the percentage of nationalities in study three – however, a number of forums for smaller games were canvassed for participants, including games commonly played in Korea, etc. In the future, this issue could be easily addressed by specifically getting participants from such countries, together with a check question in the questionnaire asking their nationality.

6.5 Reflexivity

There are a number of criteria by which rigour may be established within research, including triangulation, disconfirming evidence, and reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The thesis employed a number of these strategies such as triangulation, through the use of three different methodological techniques, each with their own strengths and weakness. Also present was the search for disconfirming evidence, also present in good GT practice (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), as evidenced by multiple positions for the presentation of self being shown in the qualitative chapters. Finally, there was peer debriefing, with Dr.Fila doing a blind analysis of 10% of the study one transcripts (see appendix VI).

With respect to the final Creswell criterion mentioned (Creswell & Miller, 2000), reflexivity is an integral part of research and, arguably, one that is often missed (Finlay, 2002a). However, since the role of the qualitative researcher involves manipulating data at the very least an awareness of the researcher's role is essential – by which the research can understand what their own experiences and understandings have brought to the situation (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Finlay, 2002b; Holloway & Todres, 2003).

The most important point of reflexivity is the fact that I am a gamer and had an in-depth knowledge of the gaming environment before the research started. I had some initial thoughts concerning the presentation of self in MMOs, but did not know how it

might be achieved, and was also aware that some gamers simply played out their offline version of self. This is reflected in both the qualitative studies, which contain quotes from players who replicated their offline selves. There is the possibility that I overlooked certain points however, in both the qualitative studies. It may be that because I already had extensive knowledge about MMOs in general, I failed to probe deeply enough on certain points, where further discussion would have revealed new insights.

In study one though, I was able to gather 40% of the study population through in-game contacts; again, there was the potential risk that this action, either through the game association or lack of awareness might have inadvertently skewed the data set. I believe the risk of this was small though, since my interaction with some of the guild mates in game was minimal, and potentially limited to saying hello and goodbye.

In study two, my primary role was to facilitate the focus group discussions. However, as it become apparent that not everyone was going to take part and the group failed to achieve a critical mass where extensive spontaneous discussions occurred, my style became more that of an interviewer. However, there was some interaction later on in the group between the participants that lessened the need for asking questions. Throughout, I also interspersed my questions with comments concerning my own characters – partially to help establish my gaming credentials, but also to clarify any unclear meanings. It is possible that such examples might have skewed what the participants said, but again, there is no evidence in the results to suggest as such.

It is also questionable whether I should have taken a more assertive course of action with respect to the non-participants in the focus group, and removed them. This might have created a more intimate environment for the active participants that would have encourage more interaction, but at the same time ran the risk of ejecting participants who were about to take part. This was a tricky decision to make, but based partially on the desire to get the best data available, and also since no protocol had been established for removing inactive group members, it was decided to leave them as they were.

For both of the qualitative chapters, a number of subjective decisions were made, as part of the analytic process; it is recognised that these decisions were critical in the production of the final model reached, with the validity of those decisions being carried by the quality of the extracts from the appropriate study.

In study three, again it was the decisions made during the analytic process that were most influential. In the first CFA I had to decide when to discard the model being tested, since at that point I was following the modification indices with respect to model changes. In actuality, when the final model failed to converge, the decision to discard the model was relatively straightforward since to carry on with it would not have been defensible either statistically, or theoretically.

In the first EFA the decision lay in how many factors to extract from the analysis – with the parallel analysis (Horn, 1965) initially suggested nine factors should be retained. Parallel analysis, as much as the use of Kaiser's criterion (Guttman, 1954) or scree plots (Cattell, 1978), is a guide rather than a rule, and so there was some flexibility within the decision making process. After having examined the concept statements for the factors six to nine, together with the scree plot, it seemed only sensible to select five factors. There was a noticeable 'elbow' after factor five in the plot, and there were only two concept statements for the factors, so reducing the rigour within the factor. In contrast, the five selected factors had at least three loading statements, all of which were above .40.

Lastly, the second CFA had similar concerns as the first CFA but this time the decision was somewhat simpler. The first version of the second CFA was much closer to indicating a good fit for the data (through the fit indices), and rather than following modification indices that were theoretically indefensible I decided to leave the model as it was, a technique advocated in the literature (Kelloway, 1998).

6.6 Implications

Over the last ten years there was been an exponential growth in social platforms on the Internet, where the term social platform can cover MMOs (e.g. World of Warcraft, Star Wars: The Old Republic), social networks (e.g. Facebook), Microblogs (e.g. Twitter), virtual worlds (e.g. Second Life), and video sharing sites (e.g. YouTube). The common feature across the platforms is the ability to share content, which is created and commented upon by the users (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

More than other virtual spaces however, MMOs present a specific opportunity for the presentation of self due their unique features – an immersive graphical interface, characterised by control of an avatar, with various roles to step into, types of game play

to engage with (PvE, PvP, RP), and being able to do impossible things. More than that however, there is automatic anonymity in MMOs, and no connections back to the offline world that might mar the presentation of self being enacted.

Given the growth in MMOs over the last 10 years, the capacity to present versions of self within them, this research is invaluable since it sheds light on the construction of self in an active and growing virtual environment. With the expectation that interaction with virtual environments will only increase (either through augmentation of offline reality, or with the wholesale replacement of the offline world) it is important to understand the impact of those actions on the individual – both in externals aspects such as improved sociability, but also internally in terms of self-concept.

However, there are other areas where this research can have implications. It is anticipated that such information will be useful to educationalists, since virtual environments could provide an area where children might be motivated to learn. There is a burgeoning industry in educational children's games, but by increasing those factors that enable the child to feel they are themselves could potentially increase their level of interaction, motivation to engage, and the amount of time spent playing.

Similarly, but with a view to reducing time spent playing, it is anticipated that therapists will find the thesis model useful in terms of weaning excessive players off MMOs. Current models of gaming playing motivation (Demetrovics et al., 2011; Yee, 2006b) overlook self-presentation, and it is predicted that future models would benefit from incorporating these elements. As a product of this, therapeutic techniques could focus on reducing the importance placed on online versions of self, through the dissociation of the gaming character from the offline self. Finally, there might be commercial applications to the findings, with future game designs incorporating ways for players to feel more comfortable in exploring aspects of themselves within the game.

6.7 Future Research

Given the breadth of this research, there are several beneficial areas of research that would complement the existing work. The first area of research could look at different types of games and examining whether they enable expression of self. It is tentatively suggested that some flash games (e.g. Farmville) might facilitate self-presentation, but that first person shooters (e.g. Battlefield 4) would be more limited.

This would be useful since it could assess whether the constructed elements of games – such as the gameplay, opportunities for socialisation, etc. have an impact outside of the MMO environment.

In a similar fashion, it would be useful to examine whether the thesis model could be extended to contemporary virtual environments such as Second Life. Second Life has many elements in common with MMOs but at the same time is substantially different, not least in the lore and mythology that guides most MMOs. Speculation would argue that many elements of the thesis model should be applicable to a contemporary virtual environment, with concepts such as Elements of self and Character Aesthetics as being particularly important.

With reference to MMOs themselves, the model has produced many interesting threads of potential enquiry. One potential research question could look at which elements of character creation seem to have the greatest impact on the presentation of self – for example some MMOs have high levels of facial and body customisation, whereas older games tend to have relatively generic faces. In addition, it would be interesting to see if a virtual humanoid 'body' is required at all for presentation of self, or whether a localised object (i.e. a body where there is close proximity between its constituent parts) is sufficient. The game Eve Online nominally involves character creation with facial customization but almost entirely relies upon the player flying a spaceship, with limited access to the character avatar.

Also profitable would be to look at the extent to which the expression of an element of self reverts towards the offline self. Evidence has been presented that shows that for some players the effort of maintaining a different version of self online would appear to become too much, and that the character identity gradually comes into line with that of the offline player. This poses the question as to the effort required to express a different version of self and whether certain (virtual) environmental factors play a role in the process of facilitating this. Finally, it is suggested that the thesis model could shed light on potentially therapeutic aspects of game play, both through temporary catharsis and escapism, and also long-term benefits of the presentation of self. This might present itself internally through changing self-concepts, but also externally through social interaction.

6.8 Chapter Summary

The final chapter of the thesis has drawn together the various threads running through the thesis – notably the conceptualisation of the self as being a structure, where the structure is created through self-schema and the self memory system, and a process, where that self interacts with other people. The presentation of self in MMOs can be explained with reference to five factors that, in variable degrees for each individual, can clarify how the version of self is presented in the game. The limitations of the thesis are discussed, together with other thesis wide concerns, including thesis reflexivity, implications of the research, and finally suggestion for future work.

The thesis has added to the existing literature, and has been original in many aspects. First, the model itself is unique, given that there is no model for the presentation of self in MMOs in the current literature. Second, the treatment of the self as a structure and a process when looking at the presentation of self in MMOs has been a unique synthesis of the thesis model and the literature. Third, a number of different methodological techniques have been used that have been unique in their application to the presentation of self in MMOs, but have also formed a mixed methodology.

Overall, the model suggests that players can use their chosen MMO for the specific purpose of presenting differing versions of self, with the aim of expressing elements of themselves which they cannot or do not wish to perform in their offline lives.

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Appendices

Appendix I: Screenshots from Guild Wars 2

Appendix II: Glossary of Gaming Terms

Appendix III: Online Locations used for Advertising Study One

Appendix IV: Study One – Pilot Study

Appendix V: Study One – Interview Schedule

Appendix VI: Themes identified by Dr.J.Fila

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Appendix II: Glossary of Gaming Terms

Term	Definition
Alt	Alternate Character (2nd, 3rd, etc.)
Belf(s)	Blood elf (A race in World of Warcraft)
Champion	A class in Warhammer Online
Char(s)	Character(s)
Cooking	A secondary profession within World of Warcraft
Death Knight	A class type in World of Warcraft
DPS	Damage per second – the acronym given to all damage dealing classes within MMOs, which can be further split into ranged (i.e. a hunter with a bow) and melee (i.e. a warrior with
Draenei	a two-handed sword)
End-game content	A race in World of Warcraft
	Content available to players after they have completed the
Gank	process of levelling up through the game
	To attack an enemy player when they have reduced health
Gender swapping	(and therefore can be killed more easily)
GL	To play a character of the opposite gender to one's offline
GW	gender
Healer	Game life
	Guild Wars (A MMO)
	As the name suggests, the primary role of the healer is to heal the tank and DPS. Several different classes are capable of
Hunter	healing, in either a primary or secondary capacity, and there are several methods of healing.
	A class type in World of Warcraft
IRL	In Real life
Levelling up	The process of gaining experience points and, at a pre-determined point, going up a level. The number of experience points required to level up increases with each act of levelling up.
Lol / LOL	Laugh out loud

Mage	A class in most MMOs, including World of Warcraft and Warhammer Online
Mobs	Monsters and bipeds in the game, controlled by the game – e.g. a wolf, an orc, etc.
Nelf /NE	Night elf (A race in World of Warcraft)
Paladin	A class type in World of Warcraft
Racials	Characteristics held by specific races (only in World of Warcraft) such as the Tauren racial characteristic of having
Raids / Raid Group	10% more health
	Groups of players (typically between 10 and 25) who work together to achieve goals set within end-game content
RL	Real life
rp / RP	Roleplay; a Roleplay server is a server theoretically set aside for roleplayers to create characters with back histories and to engage in role play, typically the majority of the population do not role-play however.
STO	Star Trek Online (a MMO)
Tank	Named after the real world tank, the tank is a role within the game that can be fulfilled by a number of classes. The primary role of the tank is to ensure that the monster attacks them, and no-one else.
TBC	The Burning Crusade – the first expansion to World of Warcraft
Toon	Cartoon (Character)
Trolls	A race in World of Warcraft
UO	Ultima Online (a MMO)
Vanilla	Any concept / item / idea which is plain and/or the first version, e.g. vanilla World of Warcraft is the game before any expansion packs (new content) were released. The phrase is taken from Vanilla ice-cream, being the original (baseline) ice
Zealot	cream
	A class type in Warhammer Online

Appendix III: Online Locations used for Advertising Study One

- http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/

- www.girlgamer.com

- www.gamerswithjobs.com

- www.mmorpg.com

Appendix IV: Study One – Pilot Study

Identity in Massively Multiplayer Online games: A Qualitative Pilot Study

Alex Meredith, Mark Griffiths, & Monica Whitty

1. Abstract

This research expands on the work of Goffman (1959) in seeking to examine how players of Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) use virtual environments as a mechanism to explore their own offline identity, through the use of multiple characters and gender swapping. Using Thematic Analysis of four interviews, five themes have been identified which will inform a larger Grounded Theory study. It is argued that these themes provide the foundation for the construction of solid theoretical constructs which will inform future discussion on all interaction in virtual environments – not only in computer games, but all other social technologies.

2. Overview of Related Work in the Area

Since the Internet has become a substantive presence in our lives, the way that we, the users, have interacted with and been changed by it has attracted the attention of psychologists. One area that psychologists have especially been interested in is presentation of the self in this space. Some have provided evidence that the Internet provides a place for individuals to present a 'truer' version of the self (Bargh, McKenna & Fitzsimons, 2002), while others have argued that people are often more strategic with their self-presentations in cyberspace (e.g., Walther, 1996). In addition, Turkle (1999, p.643) has commented upon role-playing games as an arena for identity manipulation and has noted that 'The online exercise of playing with identity and trying out new identities is perhaps most explicit in 'role playing' virtual communities…'' This paper will continue this focus on the presentation of self within an online game, namely *World of Warcraft*, and will do so with particular attention to Goffman's 'Dramaturgical approach' (1959). It will briefly examine the work of Goffman's (1959) approach and assess the impact of social constructionist theories on identity in online computer games, such as MMOs. It argues that a qualitative approach to these questions provides the most comprehensive answers, and put forward findings of a pilot study based on analyses of interviews of four *World of Warcraft* players.

2.1 Self-presentation on the Internet

Goffman illustrates that people negotiate their identities in real world encounters and use 'frames' to evaluate the meaning of those encounters. According to Goffman, the impression that people wish to convey is a carefully constructed image, based upon the techniques and resources available to them. The 'back' region is the area where players (continuing the theatrical analogy) prepare their performance which is then given in the 'front' region. Also of relevance are concepts such as information being 'given' and 'given off', in which the performer intentionally or unintentionally reveals information about themselves.

The Symbolic Interactionist school, as exemplified by Mead (1934), and an interpretation of Goffman's work, argues that identity is created and maintained through these processes of *social interaction*. These theories have been applied by numerous scholars to explain self-presentation within cyberspace. Importantly, Miller and Arnold (2003) point out that the unique nature of the Internet does not necessarily mean that representations of identity crafted there are different from those constructed in the real world. In support of this view, Miller and Slater (2000) assert that Internet identity is merely another facet of real world identity and not a separate entity in its own right.

However, there has been little application of these theories to online computer games and Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs) in particular – though the work of Smith (2004) and Chayko (1993) has addressed similar issues. Nonetheless, there have been fewer ethnographic studies, and one of the aims of this research is to fill this research gap. It is argued that a qualitative approach to studying identity in MMOs is of benefit since it is the technological context of these games that provides the background that enables such identity shifts to take place. The thematic analysis utilised in this pilot study provides a foundation upon which a larger Grounded Theory study will be developed. This latter methodology is a perfectly suited to such a task, given the current dearth of qualitative data on identity in online computer games. In this case, Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is well suited to the creation of initial theoretical constructs.

3. Problem Statement

This projects main research question is: Do players use MMOs as a means of identity exploration, through the use of multiple characters and gender swapping? Specifically, it will be seeking to assess whether players 'act out' different identities through multiple characters or through playing an avatar gender identity different to their own. This is of critical importance since online computer games represent the cutting edge of virtual interaction at the current time – embodying as they do, the largest and most active online grouping. As the line between our reality and virtual reality blurs, the representation of identity and self will take on increasing relevance in our society. Therefore, this research

is seeking to inform a Grounded Theory study, through the thematic analysis of interviews conducted upon four *World of Warcraft* gamers.

4. Methodology

4.1 Introduction

Thematic Analysis is a methodological technique that underpins virtually all qualitative research, and as Holloway and Todres (2003) point out, the 'thematizing' of meanings is a core aim within all qualitative methodologies. Despite arguments to the contrary (See Ryan & Bernard, 2000), Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that Thematic Analysis should be recognised as a distinct qualitative method. One of Braun and Clarke's contentions is that Thematic Analysis retains a flexibility which is generally lost by other qualitative approaches, given the adherence to a particular set of theoretical and methodological positions. They also outline a number of theoretical points that should be made apparent, to ensure lucidity within the research process. So, following from their lead, this section will attempt to make transparent the decisions and theoretical assumptions that have informed this research.

For the purposes of this study, it was deemed important to create a rich description of the data set given that it has two inherent advantages. Firstly, the themes generated in this initial analysis will be later used in a Grounded Theory study. Secondly, as previously mentioned, the area of identity in gaming environments has received relatively little attention using qualitative methodologies – and given this dearth of previous research, a broad spectrum data-driven methodology seemed most appropriate. Given the lack of published studies, it was deemed important that the data be allowed to 'speak for itself', and as such an *inductive* philosophy has been adopted. This particular type of approach allows themes to be drawn from the data, with as little authorial voice as possible – though it should be acknowledged that virtually all researchers have some pre-conception of possible outcomes of their research.

The study attempted to extract some of the *latent* themes within the information whilst retaining some of the *semantic* information – so treading a careful line between delving deeper into the data whilst describing other themes in less detail. Finally, the research adopted a *constructionist* perspective with respect to the themes that have appeared. It is argued here that *most* meaningful interaction occurs on a social level and should be interpreted as such, but this is not to say that all *personal* understanding has to have a social context within which it should be understood. With these methodological considerations in mind, the remainder of this section will provide details of the study and how the thematic analysis was carried out.

4.2 Participants

Given its status as a pilot study, where the primary aim is to guide further research, four interviews were carried out on players in the game *World of Warcraft*. *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) is currently the largest Massively Multi-player Online Role-Play Game (MMORPG) with over 12 million playing subscribers and has been running for nearly four years. The first author is also a gamer, and participants were found by asking within his Guild – the Black Rat Society, on the Earthen Ring server. Participants were recruited using an opportunity sampling method, and consisted of interviewing those players online at four different times in the day. This strategy was used to ensure a breadth in the type of players interviewed. The interviews were conducted in-game and lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. By interviewing the players in the game environment itself, but ensuring that they were not engaging in game activities, it was felt that this would provide a more conducive environment for discourse.

It is important at this stage to acknowledge the game knowledge of the first author, to acknowledge any possibility of the data being tainted. The first author has played *World of Warcraft* for over three years and as such has an intimate knowledge of the game, indeed one beyond that of most other gamers. Whilst this could have led to the creation of themes based on theoretical constructs without sufficient evidence to support them, careful attention has been paid to the process to ensure that the data were allowed to 'speak for themselves'. Although it is possible that such 'insider' knowledge will be used in the later study, it was deemed essential that in this case that this pilot study had no thematic restrictions placed upon it.

5. Current stage of project

The primary practical purpose of the study has been to inform a Grounded Theory study and in that respect is a work in progress. With this in mind, the following data have been attained and will inform future work.

On the basis of the weight of reference within the interviews and/or links to other concepts, there were four major themes identified in the analysis. These themes were as follows - Psychological Masking, Reference to Real Life Attitudes, Gaming as a means of identity exploration, and Concepts of Emotional Investment.

Psychological Masking

This refers to the potential for game players (and users of all Internet-based communications) to create a mask or screen, through which they can filter the impression that they wish to impart. This mask can both remove negative elements, and also add positive elements that the player may wish to express. This is expressed by all the participants, and illustrates the concept of the Back and Front stage, as outlined by Goffman (1959):

'I'll play along with other people's rp (Role play) but I'm a very private person as a rule so wouldn't want a part of be to be on display to people I don't know, even if they didn't realise it'. (Female, 31)

'I speak much more than I normally would in person, but my character and sense of humour are the same'. (Male, 25)

'Well, I feel I'm more social in WoW then in RL (Real Life)'. (Male, 18)

'Sometimes I tend to do a bit of role play, and try to be a "character"' (Male, 24).

Reference to Real Life Attitudes

Whilst gamers may seek to entirely mask their own real life identity, without conscious effort many inadvertently allow some creep, of their identity into game characters. This is similar to the concept of information being 'given off', as identified by Goffman (1959). This is most clearly expressed through stereotyping of other player characters, but can also go from the game to real life. The participants, through their game names Ruben and Lottie, give an example of this:

'I guess I think some classes are more rugged and masculine than others'. (Male, 25)

'I guess it's (Online Gaming) made me less likely to judge a book my its cover, and more open to things like RP, and, indeed, computer games.' (Female, 31)

Gaming as a means of identity exploration

Three of the gamers appeared to use their gaming experience as a means of *some* level of identity exploration. The characters Klaus and Lottie express this theme eloquently:

'The last character…is played when I feel emotional, therefore it's a female character dealing with love and friendship very much.' (Male, 18)

'*I like the warrior because he gets to charge in and be the centre of attention…which isn't like real life*'. (Female, 31)

Concepts of Emotional Investment

Whether using their characters simply as a vehicle to play the game, or as a more personal means of identity exploration, there are varying degree to which gamers imbue their avatars with some degree of their own emotionality.

'*I enjoy the social aspects too, but don't forge emotional attachments to the people I meet*' (Male, 25)

'*I don't tend to role play my real life feelings*'. (Female, 31)

6. Expected contribution

The primary objective of this work has been to inform a Grounded Theory study and these findings have already guided research that is currently underway. It has also identified areas where the Dramaturgical perspective of Goffman (1959) might continue to provide beneficial contributions. More than this though, as our real lives and our virtual lives becomes increasingly entwined, the way that we interact with modern technology will become increasingly important. Every facet of communication – whether on mobile phones, the Internet, or in games – and through all media, such a social networking sites, blogs or personal web pages, will express the user behind them.

This research indicates that the virtual environment itself is of crucial importance in regulating how people portray themselves. Multiple environments will allow users to represent themselves differently, and through utilisation of a 'Psychological Mask' people are able to flexibly adapt to those environments. In the research itself, it is undoubtedly true that more interviewees would have been beneficial. This would have provided more data so enabling greater generation of themes in the results. However, given the aim of guiding the later Grounded Theory study, the research has still been successful. At this stage, generalizability is not a key issue.

The results have yielded interesting possibilities for future research. Foremost of these is looking at when and how people utilise this 'psychological mask' when portraying the identity version they desire to depict. It might well be that users will want to reveal different versions of themselves across different media, but also that the media itself will

facilitate or inhibit this process. In addition, the emotional investment that users imbue their virtual identities may yield fruitful findings. This process of attachment will dictate how much a particular technology will become entwined in the users' lives. This, given the growth of Internet manifestations, will be of critical importance in the future. Massively Multiple Online games are the largest single, interactive virtual environments and offer a unique opportunity to understand both the context and the content of social interaction in the years to come. As such, results from research such as this will inform all types of virtual interaction across all media and technology.

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Appendix V: Study One – Interview Schedule

Interview Schedule Questions

Section 1: Demographics

Section 2: Individual Identity

    1.1 Character Creation
    1.2 Multiple characters
    1.3 Gender swapping
    1.4 Versions of self
    1.5 General questions concerning multiple characters & gender swapping
    1.6 Real world / Game world overlap

Section 3: Impact

Interview Schedule Questions

Section 1: Demographics

- How old are you?
- What is your gender?
- What is your sexuality (Heterosexual, Homosexual, Bisexual)
- What is your ethnicity?
- What's your relationship status?
- Where do you live in real life?
- What primary game do you play?
- Do you play any others?
- What server type do you generally play on? (Normal, PvP, RP, RPPvP).
- Why that server type?

Section 2: Individual Identity

2.1 Character Creation

- Do you find that generally you drawn to a particular type of class? E.g. casters, melee DPS, healer, etc.

       ○ If yes, what class is this?
       ○ What draws you to different class types?

       ○ If no, why don't other classes interest you?

- Do you have particular positive or negative thoughts about a certain class type?
- Does everyone have thoughts like this in your experience?

- When you create a character, how much do you imbue it with some part of yourself?
- Do you consciously RP a character?
- If you had to choose a particular 'class' to represent 'you', what would it be?
- Why that class?

- Do you find that generally you drawn to a particular race? E.g. Dwarf, Elf, Human, etc.

  - If yes, what race is this?
  - What factors influence this decision?

  - Do you associate certain attributes to a certain race?
  - Do you have any expectations of what the player playing a particular class / race / faction is like irl?

- Do you find that generally you drawn to a particular faction? E.g. Good, evil, etc.

  - If yes, what faction type is this?
  - What factors influence this decision?

  - Do you have any emotional associations with any combination of class, race or faction?

2.2 Multiple Characters

- Have you created multiple characters in your game playing?
- How many do you have?
- Could you tell me why you've created multiple characters?
- Do you feel there's any difference in the way you treat or play your characters?

  - Could you give some examples of these?

2.3 Gender Swapping

- Do you have characters that are a different gender to your own? (Gender swapping)
- Could you tell me why you've created characters with a different gender to your own?
- Do you feel there's any difference in the way you treat or play these characters?

o Could you give some examples of these?

2.4 Versions of Self

- Do you feel that your characters represent you, or part of you, in any way? With respect to the meaning you associate with them, would you say they represent real, truer or idealised versions of yourself? Or, are they a combination of these? Additionally, do different characters have different versions?

- Have you ever experimented by adding bits to a character which aren't in your natural character, or taking away bits which are?

2.5 General Questions concerning Multiple Characters & Gender Swapping

- Is one character more important to you than the others that you have?

  o If yes, can you give some examples of this?
  o Why is this the case?

- Do you think you give differing emotional weight to one character or another? This question might refer to being particularly happy if a character does well, etc.

  o If yes, can you give some examples of this?

- If you've found that you do give psychological or emotional weight to any of your characters, has this developed over time or remained constant since the characters creation?

  o If it has developed, in what has this manifested itself?
  o Have facets of the character become more important to you as time has progressed?
  o What activities, action, etc. have resulted in the development of the importance of the character over time?

- How much do you identify with your characters? i.e. if someone insults them, do you sometimes take it as an insult to you (or part of you)?

  o What factors mediate this process? E.g. the status of the person insulting you

- Have you found your personal mood affecting what your character does in the game at that time?

  o Can you give other examples of this?

- Did you initially create your characters with the intention of playing them differently to your other characters?
- Has this occurred?

- o If yes, has this been easy? What helped you stay on this path?
- o If no, what happened to stop this process?

2.6 Real World / Game World Overlap

- Do you find something that there is a blurring of your real self and your online selves?
- How are the versions different?
- Have there been times when game life (GL) and real life (RL) have merged? i.e. in dreams, or in daydreams, etc.
- How have you felt about this?
- If you have experienced it, have you done anything?
- Do you think that overlap between GL and RL is inevitable?
- Do you feel that there are stereotypes associated with a particular class, race or faction?

    - o Have you experienced this yourself?

        - Could you say a little more about these experiences?
        - How did you feel about them?
        - Can you ascertain why the person did this?
        - Has it had any impact upon your gaming life, or real life?

    - o Have you acted upon stereotypical beliefs, or otherwise acted differently towards a character of a particular class, race or gender?

        - Could you say a little more about these experiences?
        - Why was this?

- Do you feel that there are stereotypes associated with the gender of characters?

    - o If yes, have you experienced this yourself?

        - Could you say a little more about these experiences?
        - How did you feel about them?
        - Can you ascertain why the person did this?
        - Has it had any impact upon your gaming life, or real life?

    - o Have you acted upon stereotypical beliefs with respect to gender, or otherwise acted differently towards a character of the opposite gender?

        - Could you say a little more about these experiences?
        - Why was this?

Section 3: Impact

- Would you say that playing your game has impacted upon your life?
- In what way has it done so?
- Has there been a personal gain for you – outside of the enjoyment of playing the game itself? I.e. social
- What would you say the advantages of playing WoW are?
- What would you say the disadvantages of playing WOW are?
- Have you learnt anything from playing games that you've transferred (intentionally or unintentionally) into RL?

    o Social skills: Diplomacy, Conversational skills, leadership, etc.
    o Personal skills: Patience, Will power, Determination, etc.

- Have you ever learnt anything from playing computer games?
- Can you expand on those things that you've learnt?
- How much of these learning experiences get absorbed from virtual reality to real life?
- Do you find yourself becoming irritated or annoyed whilst playing WOW?

    o What kinds of thing bring this on?
    o Have you found any ways to minimise this negative impact?

Appendix VI: Themes identified by Dr.J.Fila

Themes:

-the question of personal identification with characters created (some players do partially, some don't)

-favourite character as a personal representation of the player in the virtual reality -played more, more time invested in creating them, however more of an "ideal self" character- played most but not in some situation associated with negative experiences/ moods etc., at times characters are given characteristics player would wish to have

-favourite character seen as a friend

-representation of personal characteristics in the characters- i.e. perfectionism, friendliness, wanting to help people etc.

-emotions experienced in the game

-characters' class stereotypes linked to players personality

-benefits of gaming: learning about teamwork, society, diplomacy, improving confidence, respite from rl

-cons of gaming- too much time spent in VR, getting lost in VR world

Appendix VII: Grounded Theory Transcript – Greg

Greg Interview Transcript + Coding Strips (QSR nVivo)

Greg's transcript and coding strips can be found after page 289.

Memo's Associated with Greg Transcript

07/10/2009 16:34: An interesting starting point is that Greg says that a good week of playing is 16 hours, whereas a bad week is 4. It would appear that his definition of good very much depends on how much time he can spend on WoW.

On the topic of character creation he talks of a thinking about game mechanics and then personality.

23/01/2010 15:35: Quite early in the interview Greg positions himself as a 'born nerd' with an obvious passion for gaming (so establishing a level of *micro-context*) but he also prefaces this by saying that 'there wasn't a good role in Australia' so bringing some level of *macro-context* into the situation as well. It would appear from this information then that he sees himself as a gamer, but maybe also one who hasn't had a chance to engage in gaming quite as he might like.

Greg also references the fact that he's a 'country boy' and that he does 'butchering' in WH because he can feel that he's using the animal, something as he says, which 'stuck' when he went into the game - a useful example of *Context*, but one that has influenced both the *Process* and an *Action*.

When talking of creating a character, he also talks of whether 'a character is going to suit his personality' because he gets 'impatient with healing'. This illustrates a good level of Self-Awareness and sets the *micro-context* well, whilst also indicating in what way his *actions* might go. It also illustrates some Offline Gaming Motivations since it would appear to indicate that he wants to go online and hurt stuff, as opposed to healing it.

However, Greg also references other people quite a lot, specifically in his game playing tactics - he says that he 'distracts the opponents, get their attention and die so others can fulfill their objectives'. This, together with his love of tanking, would seem to indicate the *Micro-context* behind his gaming, plus some of the *Motivations* for his *Actions*. These motivations are also reflected when he says how he envies Orcs for their simple lives (*Emotion*) - without explicitly saying so, it sounds as if would prefer to be one in some ways.

Having just coded **Escape** and **Fantasizing** together, i wonder whether they're bound together somehow - it does seem possible that people would want to escape reality (even if just for a while) and would fantasize about how that might happen.

Greg also talks quite extensively and openly about his troubles when younger, and of

being angry because he 'could see not way out for a while and no way of fitting in'. This is serious stuff and gives a clear indication of both a *micro* and *macro-context* with respect to how he sees his character, plus some idea of the background that led to the way he plays his characters. This is continued a bit further down when he speaks of why he likes playing an orc or chaos - 'the right to choose for yourself'. Again, I feel there is a clear indication here of how his childhood and adolescence affected his game playing later in life.

Additional (Undated): Interviewee has a strong sense of moral correctness, as can be evidenced by his playing characters that 'protect' over people. However, he also plays a Choppa, which is different to his RL existence but again showing a moral correctness in that he doesn't want to show his in RL.

10/04/2014 16.30:

1. What is the micro and macro context of the situation surrounding the Identity Play?

    Greg has an extensive gaming history, but a relatively short one with respect to MMOs – his game of choice at the time being Warhammer, although he had friends who played Warcraft. More than that however, he grew up in a small town in Australia, before moving to Adelaide at some undetermined age. It is apparent from his writing that he was not happy at his home town, with a certain amount of anger issues, together with parental influences which might have compounded the situation (i.e. Catholic mother). He is also a teacher IRL, and in his work has to act in a very controlled way, something which is reflected both in his offline line, and his online class choices.

2. What are the micro and macro Actions, Interactions and Emotions associated with the Identity Play?

    Greg's actions in the game are very much driven by his desire (motivation) to represent himself, or more precisely parts of himself, within the game. His interaction with other people was barely referenced at all, aside from not wanting to let a PvE group down – indeed he never mentioned any in-game friends at all. Emotionally however, there is more going on, with lots of offline motivation for playing the way he does – the most obvious of these is in how he uses different characters to represent different sides / versions of himself. He says very specifically that he has no emotional connection to his characters (principally because they are immortal), but that his own emotions are helped by the playing of the game – 'I feel calmer when I play, so I use the game to affect my RL mood'.

There are two very obvious splits – one in the faction he chooses to play (Chaos, over Order) and second in the classes that he has chosen, all of which represent some element of him. Both of these decisions are founded upon clear decisions based on how he wants to see himself in the game.

3. What are the micro and macro processes, with respect to how the player engages in the Identity Play?

Greg obviously refers back to his past, at least in the big scheme of things, with his small town upbringing obviously influencing his current self. Less clear is where his desire to act honourably, and to protect people came from, although it might be mooted that it came from the same well-spring. In the present day however, these desires are bought to life through his game characters which represent versions of himself (the Black Orc – his social 'real' self maybe, the Magus – his professional 'actual' self potentially, and the Choppa – a transient version of self which serves as an outlet). It is quite apparent that Greg is a very controlled person, and to some degree quite controlling as well; with respect to the former, at work (teaching) he is professional, polite, and efficient, but in some respects can't wait to get home (daydreaming) so he can suit up and hack people to death as a Choppa. Even for his other characters (the black orc and magi) he still approaches the characters from a relatively clinical perspective – the black orc protects, and the magus investigates. It should be noted however that even with his Choppa there are elements of protecting people, by drawing attention away from the healers to the enemy will kill him first. In terms of what type of selves he creates then, there is some discrepancy as to which character relates to which type of self.

There is no evidence of possible selves however, since Greg seems to already have a number of different versions of himself which are available to use. However, there is evidence of both importance and clarity in his self-concepts though, since in the transcript he talks quite emotively about personal freedoms, a theme which is also evidenced with respect to his game characters.

There is no particular evidence to support compartmentalisation or integration.

From a Goffmanian perspective, the game can very much be seen as the back region. In this area he can draw upon his offline beliefs, and play characters which are much more aligned to his way of thinking. Offline he has to be controlled, polite, and friendly, whilst online he can choose whatever role he wishes, based on which part he wishes to enhance.

4. What are the micro and macro consequences of the Identity Play?

Given that Greg talks so little about other people, in effect from a communal point of view, there are very few social consequences of his actions. Psychologically however, I suspect there is more going on – without the possibility of going online and playing a character, Greg would probably be much worse off.

5. What are the micro and macro motivations for the Actions, Interactions and Emotions with respect to the Identity Play?

Greg is strongly motivated by a desire to express himself in game – 'the MMO world allows me to explore the parts of me that would be hard to express IRL'. I think he also plays for fun, and for limited social reasons, but catharsis seems to play an important role. This shown on page 7 when he talks about playing to feel calmer.

6. Who are the other actors involved in the Identity Play?

Virtually none.

7. What are the keywords for this player?

Offline self
Self-promotion
Self-verification
Offline gaming history
Transference of offline attitudes
Emotional impact
Character creation
Reflexivity
Actual self
Real self
Fun
Transient self
Archetypes
Wishful thinking
Social referencing
Moral perspective
Lore
Replication
Motivated gaming
Class
Versions of current self
Gender swapping
View of the game world

8. What is the players story?

Greg is an unusual character – much more than Roch for example, and even more than Firehoof or SM, Greg has a strong relationship with his characters, as vehicles which can facilitate his expression of self in games.

Coming from a small town background in Australia, I get the impression that Greg didn't actively enjoy his time there, although he did have some friends and family. But, he moved to Adelaide when he could, presumably leaving behind something which he didn't want in his life anymore.

He seems to be trying to control something, in fact he seems to be trying to control his entire life and I would speculate that there's a lot of anger under his relatively calm façade. Quite a lot of his transcript refers to being diplomatic, not wanting to hurt people, etc. but it does smack of trying a little too much. This is seen in his actual self which works in a school and can't afford to get angry with people. Rather predictably and probably as a result of this, in his gaming sessions he is drawn to misunderstood classes (the magi, the black orc) but ones that protect and act in an honourable way. It feels as if he is trying to atone for his real life aggression, by taking on the role of the protector which indeed, might be his real self.

As he says though, at the start (human bomb) and towards the end (), he does not see himself as being the characters, there is no merging of the selves. Unlike Firehoof who sees his character as being himself and JF who is deeply connected to her characters, Greg seems to have relatively little emotional connection to his characters per se.

The characters (the mage, the black orc, and the choppa) all represent different current parts of himself and it is obvious that he has chosen these characters, or at least created meanings for these characters very carefully. Whether other characters could have done this is unclear, though it is apparent that Order alternatives would have been unacceptable.

Overall Greg comes across as someone who is battling with himself, and has adopted the MMO space as a place to engage in the creation of an alternative version of his offline self, one driven both by doing the right thing, and by thoughtless, impetuous action.

Appendix VIII: Online Locations used for Advertising Study Two

- Black Rat Society forum

- Dizzygizmo Raid Group forum

- http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/

- www.mmorpg.com

- Facebook Groups:

    o Addicted to World of Warcraft

    o Warhammer Online

    o I'm a girl and I play WoW

Appendix IX: Focus Group Transcripts

Question 1 – Character Creation

<u>Moderator</u>
Ok, the first of some topics to discuss - please feel free to write as much as you want. The more there is, the more people can respond to and the greater the interaction. :)

In the previous round of interviews, quite a few participants mentioned that the process of creating a character was important to them because it allowed them to imbue the character with parts of themselves. Take for example the following quote:

Interviewer: so why was it important to you that XYZ...had so much attention put into her?
Participant A: I think it was because I wanted to be comfortable with the character I wanted to feel she reflected some of my values .. i have never been able to really rp something alien to my nature

In particular, Class, Race and Faction seemed to be highly important for people. This might be because they thought a particular race 'cooler' or because that race appealed to their real world nature more. Take this quote for example:

Interviewer: when you make a character, does a particular race appeal to you?
Participant B: Mostly it depends on visuals and backstory…if a race looks hot or interesting, I'm more likely to go with it…it depends on the class I want to play too…useful racials are good too…undead look interesting and they have a good story I can identify with
Interviewer: identify with?
Participant B: Yeah. Nobody likes them, they are "outside" of society, their motivations aren't particularly clear, morally ambiguous, they are persecuted / hard done by but they still get on with things

For you then, when you create a character - is it important for you that that character represents part of your offline character, and how do you go about constructing the character?

<u>Rowena</u> I love character creation!
My very first MMO experience was on WoW. The way I started playing WoW was that a friend, who knew I liked pc games that were similar, suggested I try it. He then helped me through the process of creating my first character.

I spent a lot of time on her. Her name is a play on how I spell my own name (*[Character Name]*). So, I felt very connected to how this character was going to represent me in this new virtual world I was going to be exploring. Which faction...I looked at Alliance, I looked at Horde. I questioned the backstory a little (not much, not really a lore nerd, other than it's impact on the game). I looked at the various options, and since, at the time, I only had vanilla WoW (although BC was out, I had not yet purchased the expansion--this was a test, to see if I even liked the game), I chose Alliance so I could make a Night Elf Druid.

Now, deciding to make a Druid wasn't easy. I wasn't really interested in most of the classes over any others, except...Hunter. The idea of having a companion animal that fought alongside me was intriguing. But then my friend told me about Druids shapeshifting into various animal forms, and it quickly evolved into, *have* a pet or *be* an animal! So, Cateye was born.

I also spent a great deal of time tweaking *[Character Name]'s* appearance. The tattoo was very important. I chose the long flowing hair since my hair was below my waist at that time. I chose purple because there was no red hair option. Other than changing her hairstyle to the one with the loose braid in back, her look has not changed any in the three years since.

I think the amount of time I spent (easily a couple of hours!) in creating her reflects my own personality more than any of the others I have created since. And I've created quite a few, but those are stories for another post.

I have never gotten tired of this character. More than any other toon I will ever create, in any game, this one is truly my own avatar.

[Rowena](#)

I guess on a deeper level, Druids most represent my outlook on life. Within WoW, they are attuned to the natural world, and participate in it in a way that our real, first-world societies don't, anymore. It may seem ironic that I am using a non-natural medium to experience this, but our human capacity for imaginative living is something I think our remote ancestors shared.

Example: The hands-down most exciting thing that ever happened to me in-game, which continues to give me pleasure today, was first, getting flight form, then the pinnacle of epic flight. I have all my forms bound to my mousewheel, so that I can easily shift into any shape.

Even though I have won the twilight drake from Sarth 3D, I have to consciously stop myself from using flight form to use it, and so properly demonstrate my gratitude to the guildie who passed on it for me. It was one of the very few flying mounts I ever had any interest in, and he stipulated I had to use it instead of flight form for two weeks!

You may wonder how I can connect the digital flight of my Druid to the real-world participation in nature. I ask, have you never leaned back and watched a bird in flight, soaring with it in your imagination?

[Christina](#)

Character creation takes me freakin forever.....I love it, but at the same time I find it kind of stressful. I'm not one to like making decisions, especially ones that I'm "stuck with". It honestly takes me an hour to make a new character – with the hardest part being naming of it. To me naming is a big deal because this is what I'm going to be called and this is who I am to others in the game. I also have a somewhat anal/OCD naming system (2 word, 3 syllable, food or food-related names) that I have to adhere to, as well as that name having something to do with the character (I'll explain shortly).

Faction - I'm horde. All of my serious characters are horde and I don't have any interest in playing alliance. Ironically, if I started WoW entirely alone I probably would have

chosen alliance because I really knew nothing about MMOs prior to this game and the gnomes looked kinda cool. However, I started playing after observing my husband playing (he doesn't play anymore) and thinking it looked fun. He was horde on a pvp server, as well as a real life friend of ours, so I was stuck with horde. I've grown to love horde though and am glad I didn't go alliance =P

My first character was an undead mage named *[Character Name]*. Like I said, prior to wow I didn't have much mmo, or even rpg, experience so I honestly just picked this class based on the appearance on the character creation screen – I liked the robe (much to my dismay this starter robe got replaced by a tunic in a couple levels…). I was a total noob, but I'm glad I picked mage as I found I really enjoyed casters. I picked the name *[Character Name]* because I wanted a funny name and while trying to think of one I went to my fridge, and that was one of the few things in there. I made her green where rot spotty things on her face (like pickle warts =P).

From grouping with others for dungeons, I quickly realized that as much as I liked the mage, I wanted to try a class where I felt I had more impact on the outcome of the success of the group. That's when my main, *[Character Name]* (female troll priest) was born (she's all blue with a trihawk hairstyle). I fell in love with healing and although I leveled to 60 in vanilla as shadow, whenever grouped I healed (in instances or in bgs). As soon as I hit 60 I went holy and never looked back (including lvling as holy in tbc and wotlk). She currently has holy and disc as her two specs (sometimes the second spec is shadow instead of disc though).

From playing a healing priest, I noticed the difference b/w good and crappy tanks, but didn't understand from that perspective, so I wanted to learn firsthand more about tanking to see what made a good tank or a bad tank, and that's when my druid, *[Character Name]* (female tauren), was born. Out of the tanking classes, I chose this one because I liked the concept of a hybrid class, and like Rowena, I could identify with the closeness to nature thing that is part of the druid.

I guess I'm going farther than just character creation in all of this though…but ya, the process of character creation is pretty important to me. All of my names take me a while to think of so they fit my naming scheme and they have to fit the character too (*[Character Name]*– druid – milk ; *[Character Name]*– blue; *[Character Name]*– green with spots; *[Character Name]*– bacteria in yogurt – disease – dk…ok..so maybe that one's a stretch haha; etc.). It's funny, before I made *[Character Name]*, I had made a dk with the name "*[Character Name]*" since it was sort of food related and dk's are facerollers…I got her to 62ish and got her professions around 300…but I still wasn't satisfied with the name so I deleted her to remake her as *[Character Name]*=P

Also, I need to be satisfied with the appearance. When I make a character, I think to myself, "if I was a such and such class, how would I want to look"…and that's where I go from there. IMO, my mage looks "cool", my priest and druid are more on the "pretty" side, and my dk looks "badass". The appearance is part of the identity and for that reason I can't bear to change it via the in game barber shop. I changed *[Character Name]*hair and it felt so wrong…it didn't feel like her anymore and so I changed it back the same day. Likewise, when they changed feral forms, I wasn't happy with Chai's cat form so I changed her skin colour slightly so I would like the animal forms again, but I felt like I was somehow violating who she was…so I changed it back. Maybe that's weird though since I know ppl that change their in game appearance like every week. /shrug

Hanna
My first MMO (Everquest) I made a high elf paladin with the help of my husband. She was beautiful. She was not really a representation of myself in real life, as I do not have red hair...but maybe she was a representation of what I wished I looked like, lol. I had an entire set of high level armor made for her by a friend that had been playing for a few years and colored the entire set in a bluish purple color. My helm looked like cat woman. It was very cool. My second MMO was WoW. I decided that since I got so much attention in game from people for having a beautiful toon, I would see if I got the same reaction with an "ugly" toon (plus the only really attractive toon in that game on horde was blood elf, and there were already thousands of them!). I made a female orc hunter. The difference in the way people treated me was unbelievable! Luckily I am not the type of person to allow THAT to effect my game. I had a great time with that character, but alas I was much more of a social outcast due to my appearance. Good thing hunters are great at solo playing!

My third and by far most favorite MMO is Warhammer. I did not want to go with the obvious "sex pot" looking Witch Elf, I am not so much for the up close and person fighting style. I also did not want to go with greenskins due to the fact that they do not have a female option. I just cannot play a male toon, its a barrier I just cannot seem to get past. I did not want to play a Magus, because I just did not like their mechanics. I also thought since I had only played a small healer role in Everquest as a paladin that I might want to give full healer a try. So, I chose my zealot, whom I love playing--I am a heal monster! When choosing her looks, really the only noticable difference between the choices is the hairstyle. On a zealot, most of the choices are a messy style that looks like it has been cut with a butcher knife. Instead of choosing one of those styles I chose the only style that seemed nice and neat. The cut shorter in the back, long and straight in the front look. And I made her hair white. Not that I relate to white hair, but I thought it helped the clean look, on a toon that otherwise looks pretty grungy. I have only seen one other zealot with both my hairstyle and color--but I have only seen her once.

I guess for me, it is somewhat looking cool--but my main focus is looking as different as possible in a game that can have hundreds of toons that look similar. Individuality is important to me personally in my MMO's, as it is also for me in real life. I am not one of those people who strives to be so different that I end up looking emo or goth or some other stereotype--which leads you too being in a "group" and looking/being like everyone else in that group...personally I think being different doesnt mean you have to look weird or sad or dark, just that you have to be YOU. Each of my toons seems to represent a different side of my real life personality. Maybe that is because I cannot seem to find all of my personal traits in one MMO. ;)

Moderator
Fantastic replies - thanks for completing those! And now a few questions, heh...if anyone else has thoughts or opinions, please chip in.

Although I will ask questions, I don't want to people to feel that can't or shouldn't ask questions of each other. I know you might feel nervous about asking someone else about their gaming experiences, but I'm doing it and you haven't left the group yet. ;)

In addition, although I might ask a question of one person, if you feel it's relevant to you,

then feel free to answer it as well.

Rowena:

Have you played any games in the past, or is this the first (as well as the first MMO?). I simply ask because I've played computer games for over 20 years now and would call myself a gamer, in fact it's part of my real world identity.

It really comes across that this character is important to you - if that is the case, why is that? What does she mean to you?

You also mentioned being Alliance - Faction being something Christina mentioned as well - what does membership of that faction mean to either of you? How would you feel if all your chars were suddenly transformed into members of the opposing Faction? (heh, I'd hate that, I really would...) :)

You also talk of being a druid, what is it about them that appeals? Do the idea of a 'druid' represent what you like to see yourself as?

Moderator
More questions... :)

Christina:

I know what you mean about character creation being such a problematic time. Why is it for you though, what's so important about it? You said 'this is who I am to others in the game' - do you see your characters as 'you' in the game environment, or just a means of playing the game itself? This also sort of comes out in having multiple characters - are they there to represent different sides of yourself, or are they just so you can learn what a tank does, etc - as Hanna said.

You also said something really interesting about feeling that you were violating *[Character Name]'s* cat form when you played around with her looks. Can you expand on that a bit? Is she an entity unto herself then, or part of you? How does she connect to you? In a way I think I know what you mean, if I played one of my characters (a grumpy priest) as helpful and friendly I'd feel almost like I'd betrayed him... :)

Moderator
Hanna:

Tell me a bit about the different response you got with your characters, it seems like a really pronounced difference. I was wondering as well, did that change how you felt about or related to the characters?

The gender swapping thing is really interesting as well; something I found from the previous round of research is that men seem to gender swap a lot more than women. I'm still not quite why this is, but I've yet to see anyone who 'happened' to choose a gender opposite to their own. Whether people gender swap or not, it seems to be a conscious decision either way...you describe it a barrier you can't get past? :)

You also mention that individuality is important to you irl and in-game. Is there a straight

link between the two? How would you feel if you didn't express yourself in either? You also mention multiple characters at the end - do they represent different sides to you then? My characters certainly do, although I admit that with time they've merged a bit - I'll raise that idea in a different thread though. :)

[Hanna](#)
Well I think there are a couple of aspects of the differences. One difference, was that the "good looking" toon had a lot of tells, emotes, etc being sent in a more flirtatious manner-once guys found out I was in fact, a woman. Hot female toon, womens voice...automaticaly a sexual situation for a man whether they realize it or not. Even when you do not take that behavior to heart, this can be somewhat of an ego boost for most people. Unfortunately there is no moral conduct online and no repercussions to the crude and sometimes sexually harrassing behavior for someone they might have offended on the other side of the computer screen.
By the time I made my "ugly" toon, I was sick of people sending me tells, etc. in that regard--male attention after all, NOT why I was playing the MMO. With my "ugly" toon, I received a lot of joshing and good natured ribbing from the male players--but when in a group, most of the males would focus on the female with the "pretty" toon and barely speak to me, as if I was an orc in real life. It was like moths to a flame! This was discouraging to me, as I wanted to be judged on how well I played my toon and how well I got along with others, not how my computer pixels on a screen looked. It seemed like I was cursed for one extreme or the other, that is until War--when I was able to make a toon that seems to be right in the middle...more "average" looking you could say. This toon offers me both sides of the spectrum and I am well known on my server as being one of the best healers, easy going, and am well sought out by dungeon groups and rvr premades. Which is exactly what I was wanting out of the two previous experiences.

As far as the gender thing. I am not sure why it's that way for me honestly. I just like being feminine I guess, but I also like being a badass chick. A lot of men are considered "badass", but women who are badass are out of the ordinary. ;) Which I think goes along with my desire for individuality. There are far fewer women gamers than men--so I want to show my support for the role of women, which is most easily done if I look like one.

My husband's main toons are always male, but has played several female toons, he told me once after making a blood elf on WoW "If I am going to make a toon I have to stare at for hours a day grinding, at least it can have a nice butt." lol. My husband said to tell you that men think in realms of sex--I'm going to make this toon because it is what I think is sexy, whereas women make the toon because that is what they invision themselves to be. How many men who gender swap play ugly women toons? Not any I know, lol.

I do believe there is a link between individuality in real life and in game. I try to live by the same codes in game that I do in real life. Although I do participate in the occasional role play, I cannot really vary too far from how I really am. In which case I do not think I roleplayed my orc nearly as well as I did my high elf, simply because orc's are seen as big stupid brutes, and high elves are seen as mellow, educated and intelligent....and of course in real life I am educated, and certainly like to believe that I am intelligent, haha.
I think I agree when you say that your toons have merged a bit with time. I feel that on my current favorite toon, my zealot on War, that I have finally found the perfect balance between all of my real life personality traits. Maybe that is why I love the game so much,

and love that toon so much. I'm not sure. It could be a combination of that and the fact that I am freaking awesome at my class! =)

[Christina](#)
To answer your questions:

Q: I know what you mean about character creation being such a problematic time. Why is it for you though, what's so important about it? You said 'this is who I am to others in the game' - do you see your characters as 'you' in the game environment, or just a means of playing the game itself? This also sort of comes out in having multiple characters - are they there to represent different sides of yourself, or are they just so you can learn what a tank does, etc - as Hanna said.

A: I think it's tough for me because permanence is something that always scares me a bit (the reason i'll get piercings, but not tattoos). I've been playing WoW for over 4 years now, and so decisions I made 4 years ago about my characters I'm still living with (yes, i realize I can go to the barbershop now, but that wasn't always an option!).

I don't necessarily see them as "me" persay... I'm not one to rp with my characters. If people ask me questions about me, I'm going to assume and answer re: me as a person, not me as an avatar. I'm on a pvp server so no one else really RPs either. However, I do view my characters as representations of myself in this world. So, just as I'd want to be happy with myself as a person in the real world, i want to be happy with myself in this virtual world, including my name and appearance. As for my ingame personality - it mirrors my RL personality. I do my best to behave in game how I would in real life (ie not be a douche like so many seem to be).

As for multiple characters, they all are my personality, just different appearances/names/roles. So I wouldn't even say it's a different side of myself, just wanting to explore different aspects of the game.

_____

Q: You also said something really interesting about feeling that you were violating *[Character Name]'s* cat form when you played around with her looks. Can you expand on that a bit? Is she an entity unto herself then, or part of you? How does she connect to you? In a way I think I know what you mean, if I played one of my characters (a grumpy priest) as helpful and friendly I'd feel almost like I'd betrayed him... :)

A: Because I take character creation as seriously as I do, when i make a character I'm under the expectation of myself that this is who they are. Because I don't play around with making characters with specific personalities (like i said, they're all "michelle"), their looks and name is all that there is left to identify them as that character. When I changed *[Character Name]'s* skin tone so i would get a cat form i liked better (when they introduced different form skins), it didn't feel like *[Character Name]*anymore. It felt like some other tauren druid. I had taken half of what makes her her (the appearance) away. For me, the name and the appearance go together, and that's all that there is (since the personality is me). haha..i hope that makes sense!

[Rowena](#)

Q: Have you played any games in the past, or is this the first (as well as the first MMO?). I simply ask because I've played computer games for over 20 years now and would call myself a gamer, in fact it's part of my real world identity.

A: I've been playing computer games since Pong came out, lol. Yes, I'm really that old! I played arcade-style games on an Amiga 1000 in in the early 80's, bought a Nintendo when they first came out, played PC games in the 90's, so I suppose video gaming is a regular part of my life, although I don't neccessarily identify as a 'gamer.

I have always been a big fiction reader, particularly of sci-fi and fantasy stories--I read the Lord of the Rings trilogy as a teenager, and re-read it several times every 10 years or so. I have an art background and always tried to draw scenes from the stories I read. Discovering World of Warcraft was very exciting for me, especially the first year when I was leveling Cateye to 70. It felt like I was exploring the fantasy worlds I had been reading about my entire life. I loved the look of it as well as the ability to move my character three-dimensionally.

It really comes across that this character is important to you - if that is the case, why is that? What does she mean to you?

A. *[Character Name]*, as my first toon to explore Azeroth, had some rather thrilling adventures. I remember playing 8-bit Legend of Zelda, and screaming with surprise when the 'dragon' popped out of the lava at Link. I had an even more thrilling moment when prowling through Ashenvale in catform and discovering a world Dragon being guarded by level ?? Dragonkin! I had no game guide then, everything was new and being uncovered as I went along. Sadly, no MMO will bring me that again, I don't believe--I played Aion for a few months last fall, and it just wasn't the same. I met my first in-game friends on her--really my first online friends that were people I didn't already know.

She is my avatar; therefore she represents me. I have been online a long time, but not part of the 'social network' aspect of it in a way that younger people have grown up with. I am highly conscious of privacy issues, and that the web is a very public place. She gave me a safe way to explore online relationships until I became comfortable there.

Also, in a very real way, my WoW toons are much like having a closet full of dolls, and I play with them in much the same way. In some ways my 'dolls' are like 'sisters' to each other. In other ways, they represent other facets of *[Character Name]*--I have another druid, a hunter, a priest and a rogue in various stages of leveling. Only the warrior is not being leveled, but she is my auction house/bank alt, and 'protects' *[Character Name]'s* interests! I have other toons of varying races and classes, but *[Character Name]*was my first and remains my main.

Q. You also mentioned being Alliance - Faction being something Christina mentioned as well - what does membership of that faction mean to either of you? How would you feel if all your chars were suddenly transformed into members of the opposing Faction? (heh, I'd hate that, I really would...) :)

You also talk of being a druid, what is it about them that appeals? Do the idea of a 'druid' represent what you like to see yourself as?

A. Well, since the Horde version of druid is a cow....I would HATE changing factions!

And when my guild leader was worried I would follow an in-game friend who changed servers and factions, I explained to him that Cateye could never be a cow!

However, I am more of a pacifist than a pvp-er and have enjoyed questing in neutral zones and helping/being helped by Horde players--using emotes to indicate intentions, taking turns killing the quest mobs and helping each other complete quests. Needless to say I am on a 'regular' server, not a PVP one. I am not one to 'demonize the other' in real life, and I don't do it in a game, either.

I do, in fact, have a Tauren druid that I am leveling--but she is over a year old and only level 23. It's interesting to see the zones I know very well as Alliance from the Horde PoV, but I'm not nearly as attached to this toon as my night elves. I have several Blood Elf toons as well; they are pretty but as a class, I prefer the druid to any other, and the night elves over the tauren.

And yes, I would say my personal outlook on life is most akin to the Druidic outlook. I am not religious at all--in fact I feel that 'religion' is a method of social control. But I do think that our need for spiritual connection to the world around is part of what defines us as human, and the druidic use of nature is very appealing to me.If there is magic in this world, it is the magic of the natural order, from the most minute quantum to the most expansive galaxy.

Hanna's remarks about gender were interesting.

When I was first playing, I literally could not conceive that a male would play a female toon, or vice versa, until I met someone while questing. We started chatting, and when he discovered I had a motorcycle, too, he immediately asked if I was really female! I was surprised he asked, other than the fact that not as many women ride motorcycles as men do, but it was the first time it occurred to me to doubt that the gender of the player might not match the gender of the toon. It made sense once I thought about it, but in many ways, playing WoW for the first year or so was like going through adolesence all over again, with all the preconceptions and misconceptions that entails.

[Mike](#)
Hokay, this question comes with a lot of backstory. Character creation is a fun experience for me to be sure, but it's not something that is "gamebreaking" for me. Not anymore at least, and I didn't really ever thing it was, but I am going to look at this objectively and think as I type

I started playing WOW(also my first MMO) right before Burning Crusade came out. I did one raid(molten core) two days before the big release. My main was a hunter. I chose this because SHOCKER!!!!! I hunt IRL. Difference being I hunt ducks and geese whereas my main hunted humans and gnomes. I am an animal lover actually, i just love the way ducks and geese taste and they arent common items in the supermarket. I chose orc because of their pure badassness, but looking back, thats actually kinda what I look like. Im not saying im a gigantic green muscleman with red burning eyes, I was a football player. I was also raised on a farm(orcs have a deep background in nature and things growing, demons just got a hold of em :V). I grew up in the gym and in the fields though. I worked hard at what I did, thats what orcs represented to me. The workhorses of the horde. They also take a lot of pride in what they do. I am super proud of my accomplishments on the field and on the farm. My family farm actually has a deed signed

by Andrew Jackson. We have been there for awhile. I would defend the farm with my life if I had to. Orcs would do the same for their homeland I would imagine. Hell I went into sunwell Plateau to kill the one who took the orcs homeland away from them. So now that I have looked at it, yeah my personal life did reflect my character creation.

The name is one thing I did take from my personal life. My hunter, for a long time, was named *[Character Name]*. I am a pig farmer IRL, as i mentioned earlier. I take pride in the animals we raise. Make sure they are well fed, cleaned, etc etc. I named my character *[Character Name]*to reflect that aspect of my life. We had this boar on our farm, the main "stud" if you will, named Iroc. He was getting older and as boarhogs get older, they develop very, very, very nasty tusks. Few things have i seen in my life that are scarier or more deserving of respect than that boar. He wasn't mean or anything, but if he ever got pissed at me while I was in the pen with him, I would be in trouble. I couldn't turn my back on him, or it could have been the end of me. I rolled on a PvP server and that's what I wanted to reflect in my character. Someone that commanded respect when you see him. It's the reason I have almost 100k Honorable kills and the Justicar title(i switched to alliance recently, i will get to that in a sec). I take pride in this character just the way I took pride in my real life. And you know what? People started running away from me when they saw me swooping down on my Vengeful Drake(whoo hoo season three gladiator XD). I commanded respect when they saw me. People wanted to play with me. I was actually sought after by several of the top end raiding guilds on my server(Maelstrom US). It may sound a bit elitist to say things like this, but I can;t help it, I am proud of my character.

Recently, due to some issues horde side(SEVERE overpopulation) I transferred my characters to ally side. *[Character Name]* is now *[Character Name]*. I chose the name because I thought it sounded hilarious. That and my character has a beard, Dwarf FTW! I chose dwarf because I generally...well...hate Nelfs and think Dranei are wierd looking spacegoats. The females look ok, but I just think dwarves reek of badassness. Short, stocky, rough and tumble race who drink and fight just for kicks. I don't really think the character reflects myself as much as it used to, but there are similarites I suppose. I am more built like a dwarf than any other race in the game. I'm not as short(5'11), but I am really built similar. I am a stocky type of guy, but when you see me you dont think "GOD WHAT A LARDBUTT!". I am pretty well built. I look like an defensive lineman, which is what i played in High School and college(football). I also gave my character black hair, which i have, and that;s about it. :]

Don;t know if this was exactly what you are looking for, but I hope it helps.

Kevin
For me, creating my WoW character went like this.

I liked Undeads in Warcraft 3.
Warlocks get a free mount.
All these haircuts look bad, let's make him bald.
Done.

He means so much to me nowadays, but no thought went into his creation.

Hi Kevin

It sounds like there's some reference to gaming history there though, as if you're carrying on from a previous game?

And you mention he means a lot to you nowadays, in what way? I mean, if he were deleted, or were a different class, faction, etc...

I loved those Undeads in War3. As it turned out, they are the only faction in War3 that didn't become a playable race in WoW, although I didn't realise it at the time. They were the Galactic Empire, and WoW's Forsaken are the Rebel Alliance. I've grown to enjoy playing the underdog now, and I love how much of a loose cannon the Forsaken are.

I played in the EU beta of WoW, at quite a late stage. A month or so before the official launch I think. I played for a couple of weeks and then I realised a few things. First, that I really liked the character I was playing, his abilities, his mannerisms, his demon buddies. Second, that I was definitely going to buy the game. And third, my character was going to "die" when the beta ended. So I immediately stopped playing the beta, and when the game was released I recreated my Warlock with exactly the same name and looks. So he didn't really die, he just took a short break and lost a few levels.

I've played every class and race in the game now. I haven't enjoyed any of them as much as my Undead Warlock, and I don't know if that means I was incredibly lucky to pick the perfect race/class on my first attempt, or if some loyalty to him prevents me from enjoying the others as much. I don't much care either, the result is the same.

If he were somehow deleted, and if I didn't immediately quit WoW if that happened, then I'd remake him exactly how he is. When Blizzard added the barbershops recently, I got him some hair to unlock the achievement, and then changed him back to normal. Even though he only had hair for a few seconds, I felt weirdly guilty for messing him about. :)

My first charcter was an orc rogue. I picked orc because I was joining some RL friends in WoW and they were going to go Horde, so that ruled out Alliance races. I then looked at the stats a bit and classes and thought an orc rogue sounded good for someone who had never done MMOs before and wanted the option to hide and watch. As for the name, well most of my characters names have some link to things I like in RL, only one is completely made up. The rogue is named after a character in one of my favourite novels. Most of my characters are male even though I am female in RL - I like people not knowing who I am in RL and people i group with in WoW just assume I am male. I have two orcs and they look pretty similar - I created their look based on what I like in RL (apart from them being big ugly orcs ofc), so no beards or long hair. I have tarted around with their hair in the same way Kevin did - for the achievement and then put it back to how it was originally.

Hi all,

Well, I'll just draw from the various posts here to ask questions and hopefully kick off a discussion.

1. Gender swapping has come up quite a bit, and Hanna mentioned that men play a female character that looks sexy to them, whereas females play male characters as they envision themselves to be? How does that sound to people? Rowena also said that it never really occurred to her that someone might be of an opposite gender to the character played - anyone else have that?

2. Something else that's come up is playing by a 'code of ethics' as it were, that players want their characters to represent or live up to some kind of standard. I was just wondering how important this is, or how a character acting 'dishonourably' might feel?

3. Trips to the barbershop seem to have been quite traumatic to people, heh; I can empathise, I couldn't do it to my main character. But, there seems to be something there though - this idea of feeling guilty / having violated the character by changing them. I can't help feeling that this infers that the character has some kind of life outside of the player - but maybe I'm wrong there, any thoughts?

Alex
Rowena
1. Yea, when I first started playing, I was so involved in my own avatar representing 'me' that the idea of playing around with gender never occurred to me. Since then, I have made a couple of male characters but honestly, they're bank toons and I really can't get into playing them. For instance, I have 2 warriors as bank toons, one male, one female. But if I was going to level either of them, it would be the female. My NE guy just sits in Booty Bay wearing a fishing pole and shorts...And even as pretty as the BE's are, same thing there. My male BE pally hangs around Booty Bay bein' casual.

2. Living up to a standard...I think most people are "honorable". For all the QQing in forums about people ninja-needing frozen orbs, I only rarely came across that in my pugs. For the most part, people rolled greed, or announced they were rolling need. The thing is, as 'shady' players (and kids, too--kids are used to beiing catered to and forgiven bad behavior) find out, they quickly develop a reputation that follows them. Just like in real life. Which, actually, since there's real people behind every keyboard, the social WoW is. Real life. So yea, I want people to perceive me in game as I hope they perceive me outside it.

3. The barbershop. Yea. I've changed *[Character Name]'s* hairstyle, and my other 80's hair also. But to a look that was still hers, just maybe more sophisticated, since after all, they are the top level toons and therefore more 'mature' than the others. So I developed a little rule for myself that once a toon hits 80 they can change their hairstyle. I haven't changed hair color for any of them though. I guess it's easy for me to do that since all five of the toons I'm actually leveling look exactly like *[Character Name]*....except some have white hair instead of purple. That's the only difference. And yes, it would feel like 'violating' them to change their appearance otherwise. I guess, again, it's why I can't really faction change either. I'd rather level a Horde druid than swap one of my Alli onces. Which I am. Leveling a Horde druid...Now that i think of it, I did change her skin color once the new cat forms came out, since I wanted her to have the white cat skin, which I think is the prettiest of them. But that was a paid character change, not the barbershop, so not sure if it counts here =)

My first MMO was Guild Wars. I started with females, as that's generally what I play in RP games if possible. The all had to have one thing of me in their looks, so they all have red hair. Their names are mostly all plays on words that fit the character, just because it seemed like a fun thing to do. I gave each different personalities in game, and I suppose each is pulled from a bit of me, but none are actually me. Yet because they are my creations, they have special meaning to me. Each develops their own story, and I follow that akin to a good novel. After I got comfortable with the online interactions (and as someone said above, a bit sick of the male attention to my attractive female toons) I created some males. They are not a bit like me. LOL. In fact 2 are what I call my "eye candy" just as per another comment above about why guys like playing female toons.

Then I moved to WoW with my friends (real and online), and initially we did not know what faction to play, so I made some on both. My first was a nelf druid, as like has also been mentioned, I liked their connection to nature, plus the sick cat form. She was followed within minutes by human warlock, and troll rogue. I think you have another topic for aesthetics, but for me, trolls are the nicest looking of the horde ladies pre-BC expansion and the blood elves. Surprisingly, it was this troll that I ended up connecting with. She was badass. And somewhat unique (not so many troll toons compared to others). And as it turned out, my pals decided that the horde was for them. So since they allowed faction changes, my alliance toons have been changing faction. This was initially very weird for me, as they were no longer "themselves" (OMG I HAVE A COW!!!! I REALLY DON'T LIKE PLAYING A COW!- can't wait to make her a troll!), yet at the same time, this has allowed me to really play these characters who were languishing when on the alliance side. Plus some I have liked the change better, such as the human warlock who is now a belf. Names for most of these ones come from the D&D elven name matrix, just because I liked the sound of the names, and could give the names meaning without it being obvious (for example my hunter's name means 'cat blade'). A few are different, like my troll DK whose name is troll for "she of destruction", and my druid who maintains an old D&D character name of mine.

In each game, I have created one of every class/profession in order to experience all that each has to offer. I like variety :). The only role I have yet to take a shining too is tanking, but since I do enjoy healing and DPS, I figure that its OK if I don't do everything.

Overall, creation is something important, and takes me a bit of time, but when I am playing these toons for multiple hours, it helps if I enjoy them on some level as well. I have no males in WoW, because frankly, I find all of them, well kind of ugly LOL, except belfs perhaps, but well I think they are something else that precludes female interest heheh

I'm not sure whether I've already mentioned it, but it sounds like you start with a template of 'you' for your characters Mila, and then move them in different directions from there - is that about right?

I know there's people here who don't really play around with variations at all, but for those that do, does that sound about right for you too?

Not really a template of me, more like a template of what I think suits the race/class, combined with what pleases me... Maybe a dash of some of my characteristics, be it physical traits, personality quirks, or mannerisms, and of course things that I wish I were more like, but overall, I do think they are quite distinct from me, except when I play them a lot and get lazy at "keeping up" their individuality. LOL I think if I had to say there were a template at all that I use, its that they all be somewhat unique, because isn't everyone unique?

Rowena

Well, when I think about my WoW main and her constellation of NE look-alikes, those are mostly based on the template of "me".

But--I didn't think about this at first, because I haven't actually played in a couple of months--when I created my Aion characters, they are all pretty much their own selves. Not that they have been developed at all, but each one looks different, and in fact my main toon there (the only one I leveled at all) was based on a friend of mine, rather than me. However, she is my friend because we do share certain traits, and that my Aion main is a cleric (healer), points to what we have in common.

over the weekend I decided to level my bank alt Paladin, who is a human, and now I'm questioning whether I want her to remain human or do a race change to Draenei. That's more because I just hate the way the human females sigh and look depressed, plus I'm not real crazy about the hairstyles they have available to them--that's me wanting to fix my 'dolls' up. But she's been a bank toon long enough (over a year) that she actually does have a small presence of her own and I'm not real sure I should change that...

Moderator

Having a bit trouble posting on here, since sometimes it doesn't want to let me reply - if anyone else if having trouble send me a message and I'll create a new thread.

Mila - it sounds like your characters are a mish-mash (in the nicest sense of the word :)) of parts of you then? And there's a certain amount of 'slippage'? :)

Rowena - re. the Aion characters, were they separate in terms of looks, or their character as well? I was also just wondering why there's a difference between the two games?

I really like this idea of 'presence' as well, it seems to key into various ideas that people have spoken of in these threads. Some general questions then - does anyone else feel their characters have 'presence', and if so what establishes or gives presence to a character for them?

Mila

Mish mash is as good a term as anything :)

Presence for my characters comes from any *distinguishing* apparel they may have (be that tier gear in WoW, or interesting custom colors in GW, of just unusual combinations of items that make them stand out) plus any attitude I give them that makes them stand out. Usually for me, thats a bit of approriate humor/irony to break the ice in PUGs. I don't think any would have presense if we did not *give* it to them.

I got into the beta testing of Aion, so had to create and then lose a couple of characters. So I have never felt as invested in my Aion characters as in my WoW ones, probably because I am *very* invested in Cateye, my first ever avatar, who is still my raiding main.

One of the appeals of Aion was its sheer visual 'prettiness'. It is very pastelly (as opposed to WoW's more primary palette). The character generation screen gives huge tweak controls to all facial characteristics. For me, creating the characters was more like working in a 3d modeling program that had the added benefit of being able to take the 3d models and do something with them (I may have mentioned my art background previously).

All of my Aion toons have different looks, although there are a couple of 'paired' toons-- I made a male Scout and and a female Ranger who have similar looks. They are all *very* pretty. Even the male toon is very pre-Raphaelite in his looks. I just had a lot of fun making them. I probably made up little stories as I was doing it, but once the new patch came out in WoW, raiding picked up again and I simply don't have the free time or emotions to invest in another MMO.

There's still a lot I want to explore in WoW--it hasn't lost my interest and probably won't for a while to come. In addition, I have my WoW guild. There was a group of us who beta-tested Aion and formed a small guild there, but one by one everyone has gone back to WoW. Really, it's more lack of time and energy than anything else. So none of my Aion characters have been played enough to develop their own presences.

Well, that's an interesting point - the 'giving' of presence. From what Rowena said, it seemed like her bank alt has almost established her own presence - maybe I interpreted that wrongly though?

For you though, it's clear that you imbue the characters with presence.

Of course, looking at it from a slightly curious angle, it could be argued that the characters give us presence, by enabling us to exist in these environments. I'm crossing over with the Affordances thread a bit, but it's the idea that they afford us the possibility of existence. Food for thought (if you're inclined that way, heh).

What do other people think / feel on the idea? Whether it's us giving, or them, or both... :)

Edit: Rowena managed to sneak her post in before mine, I'll put up another post re. hers. :)

To answer about the bank toon--she was created as part of a group of 3 bank toons, each one of whom was assigned her specific role as a 'helper' for a high level-toon. So she started out with a tiny little presence right there. And since I've logged onto her regularly to manage the items she 'protects', I guess I role-play a little, even if it is only for a few minutes at a time, and that has added up over the past year. Then when I started leveling her a little I realized she did have her name and her personality, which is leading to the

question of race-change. I don't know, though, I may still decide that she is really a Draenai in disguise...

[Sarah](#)
Alex, you have asked a lot of questions about character creation, presence barbershop and factions. I'll try to add my five cent without writing a novel ;-)
Well - when I started, my husband was already playing. I had done some Diablo and quite a bit of D&D Roleplaying before. Curiously enough, the character class I like best in D&D (gnome thief, female, extremely cheeky) never appealed to me in WoW. First of all - husband and friends are Horde, so Gnome ruled out. For my main, Belf was too slick, Undead too bony, Orc too ugly, Troll would have been an option. But like Mike ma parents are farmers. So I chose female Tauren and named her to sound like a real-life cow at my parents who was a lot more clever than her fellows and - due to that - a pain sometimes... ;-)
For me, Tauren being the Native Americans of WoW was perfect - I read all the novels about the wild west and was always on the side of them. I chose warrior cause in D&D warrior is a good noob class. Found out that with the talents and so on, there is no real noob class in WoW ;-)
For the second char, I wanted to explore a different are, so I chose Belf after all (undead still too ugly). Both times it was females. Have a male twink now, but I am used to that from D&D. However, even though I like to do some playacting and getting into the male role now and then, female chars are more 'me'.
As to looks - I tend to chose something that sticks out by being not completely good-looking. One of the twinks is a female Orc, the male Tauren twink has a broken horn. I spend some time to make their look fit, so that it presents a harmonious whole. So when the barbershops came I usually only change earrings. Experimenting with hair color or hairstyles showed that the characters lose a lot in the overall appearance. However, I gave the Orc female another hairdo - the plait made her look bald ;-)
As to presence and faction swapping - I find that simply by having been through a lot, a character gets a kind of reality and presence. You know which dungeons you have been to and which equipment you have saved up for... Still, the chat entries are still me, not the character (I hardly do roleplay, although this is an RP server...)
Faction change is ruled out as all friends are Horde. I hate the way my main loooks in Stratholme *shudder* I would like to play a bit of ally chars though just to get to know their start areas and quests. As I do not have a lot of time for playing, I have to set priorities, and the main is also main priority.
;-)

[Moderator](#)
It sounds like there's a lot more flexibility in the looks of characters in Aion then? Age of Conan was similar as I recall, or was it Eve Online...? anyway, it sounds like that adds to their uniqueness?

This idea of individuality is interesting, both in how characters achieve it themselves and wanting a character to be 'harmonious' and 'not completely good-looking'. I was wondering Sarah, for you is individuality important IRL as well?

Rowena - it sounds as if finding out your bank alt had some kind of presence was almost a surprise for you? :)

[Sarah](#)

Alex, you asked me about individuality being important IRL - well, I guess so. E.g. the mere fact that everybody is wearing a certain brand of clothes will most certainly be an argument not to buy them for me ;-)

[Rowena](#)
Yes, Alex, Aion has very in-depth facial controls, many hair-styles and skin, eye and hair color options, as well as controls for body proportions, such as hand size, arm length, torso controls, etc. I saw some pretty strange looking toons, people were clearly maxing out controls in funny ways--there was one toon that had all the upper body controls maxed, a huge afro hairstyle, and the lower body controls at minimum...made for a funny-looking dwarf.

Re: my bank alt's 'presence'--Yes, it was a bit of a surprise. I was really trying to keep my bank alts as just that, storage places, but I guess I can't resist playing with them anyway...

[Moderator](#)
Heh, it sounds like Aion has a lot of flexibility and fun in it.

That's something which doesn't appear to have come up very much so far - making a character look or act in a particularly 'funny' way.

I understand what you mean Rowena, I have a bank alt who wears a tuxedo and holds a diamond tipped cane. He's level one and apart from the journey to Undercity has never been ouside, but to change him what be as wrong as changing one of my level 80s.

In his case though, his presence (to continue with that word) is based on role, and less on him representing me somehow. Like yours, it's a very specific role, but he does appear to have made it his own.

[Patrick](#)
In all honesty, my characters have very little of me in them. They aren't my avatars, they are their own beings with they own personalities.

My approach to creating a class was to first pick a class that I wanted to be, and then choose a race that had it. I would search out a name whose definition represented both the race and class. After that, it was merely a matter of finding a look for my character. Sometimes I would juxtapose the class (i.e. my "evil" warlocks would have an innocent or sweet demeanor).

The only character that I really put a LOT of thought into was an undead lock in made on an RP server. I really enjoyed creating his history and forming his personality. When I played him I could feel myself sharing his emotions (meeting Lady Sylvanas for the first time... whoo).

[Rowena](#)
Just out of curiosity, does anyone here have toons named things like, oh, "Killuintheface" or "Bankerboy", or "Joeysmom" or some other descriptive name as opposed to a proper name?

[Patrick](#)

I have a bank character called "*[Character Name]*"

Other guild members banks:
-*[Character Name]*
-*[Character Name]*
-*[Character Name]*

[Rowena](#)
I think my favorite non-name name is "*[Character Name]*", lol. In my one attempt to make a toon that was not a character, I named my first bank toon *[Character Name]* ("*[Character Name]*"), but eventually changed it to Ylli*[Character Name]*psis (she's a warlock). After that, I just gave all my bank toons actual names. But I'm always curious about how other people come up with their toon's names.

[Moderator](#)
Yah, the topic of naming characters is an interesting one - how do people go about that?

For me I guess it's largely based on the race they belong to, more than their class or Faction - my orc DK for instance is called *[Character Name]*and my Tauren shaman *[Character Name]*.

As with Patrick's approach, it's part of the process of giving them some type of identity right from the beginning.

How about others though?
:)

[William](#)
Character creation for me is important because I am always searching for a way to make my toon stand out. My favorite character creator is for City of Heroes, it has the most options and you can really make something unique and memorable if you take the time. I make a lot of my City of Hero toons with the intent to make other players laugh. I have an indestructible giant pink teddy bear named "*[Character Name]*" that gets kudos on his costume every time i join a new party.

I juist wanna make the other players smile.

[Bethan](#)
When I made my very first character in WoW it was all new to me. I had NEVER played any type of MMO before, as a matter of fact, I thought they were stupid, before I tried WoW. In any case, I chose a human, because I was still reserved about the whole MMO thing. I remember thinking who would want to be any of these other classes, they are too weird. Also, as I saw it (even though I know differently now) Alliance were the good guys, so a human it was. I went with a Mage, because after reading all of the descriptions of classes, it was the one that appealed the most to me, I cannot recall why I felt that way at that moment. Part of it was probably that my husband and I decided to play together and he chose a plate class, so I felt I would have a protector. Since then I have created many other toons, Draenei paladin, Draenei shaman, Night Elf druid, and even a Blood Elf priest. Interestingly I paid for my main character recently to race change from a Human Mage to a Draenei mage, but after about a week I realized she just wasn't the same and changed her back.

Patrick
@ Bethan: Do you think your perspective of the game would change if you decided to roll a Horde character?

Bethan
I did create a Horde toon about a month ago, she is 75 now and I am just not into her as much as I had hoped. I will likely faction transfer her. I honestly think this has less to do with the fact that she is horde, and more to do with the fact that all of my resources, professions, gold, etc are on Alliance side and while it isn't too big of a deal to transfer them as needed, it is more of an annoyance than say, tossing something in the mailbox. In addition, after 2 years of playing I have developed a whole network of friends, along with my fellow guildies that I have no access to horde side, so it now just seems lonely over there to me.

Moderator
I know what you mean re. the lack of social structure Bethan, i think it's the binding element to the game.

It's interesting that you said you were drawn to the mage, is there any particular reason for that beyond the protected bit, or was that the major reason? I was wondering if it referred back in any way to how you see parts of yourself?

Heh, a few other players have changed something about their characters but felt wrong about it - mostly in the barbershop, but race changes still count. :)

Bethan
I think my husband told me (since he had played the original Warcraft games) that mages were awesome, he told me about Jaina and how she was a cool spellcaster who could teleport around the world and blizzard stuff. I am pretty sure that sold me.

Question 2 – Gaming Aesthetics

Moderator
In this thread I thought I'd raise the issue of gaming aesthetics - i.e. what your character looks like and whether, and why, that's important to you.

For some players this topic can refer to the idea of replicating themselves in the game (a topic I'll introduce in another thread), but it can also simply refer to how they look in the game. An example of this would be my Death Knight, *[Character Name]*, and the fact that normally I wouldn't show the helm in the game. However, the Tier 9 helm actually looks pretty cool so I've set it so that it can be seen now.

The question is, why do I like it, why is it important to me that the helm can be seen? Am I doing it purely for the looks, or do I want my virtual character to look good in front of other people? We're talking about a punch of pixels on the screen, but have I somehow imbued those pixels with elements of...me?

Any thoughts or feelings on the topic? :)

Not just about me and my navel gazing, self-reference is perfectly acceptable. ;)

[Hanna](#)
I do not show my Warlord helm. It looks strange to me and doesnt seem to match the rest of the warlord gear on the zealot. Plus it looks like I have a frying pan on my face. Not cool! I WILL however, be showing the graphics on my Tyrant helm when I get it, as it looks like a huge skeletal bird head/beak and is pretty freaky looking.

As far as looks go, the one issue for me is my color. For much of the first year of Warhammer I had a particular color on my zealot. The reason for this is because there was NO ONE else I had ever seen with the color I had. The dye was from a T1 non-repeatable quest, so bascially after I picked that color the first time, I had to make several mule T1 toons to do the quest and obtain more dye to send to my zealot. I had to color her entire wardrobe to achieve the look I wanted. I also had to have a small stockpile for when I leveled up in gear. I had people constantly asking me where I found that dye, how cool it looked, and how they had never seen anyone else wearing it! I was unique, I definately stood out in a crowd!
About the time I starting wearing my warlord gear I was running low on dye and needed more. I made a few new mule toons to go to T1 for the quest. Unknown to me at that time, during the last mini patch that quest was removed. I have searched and searched--there were no alternative means for obtaining that color dye. I was heartbroken! So much so, I almost quit the game. I decided to find another "common" color that is somewhat close--but does not have the same "twang" to it. Now I look like about 10 other zealots on my server...and I am trudging on....even though I am still not happy about it!

[Christina](#)
What my character looks like is definitely important to me. I get really excited when my gear matches, and it looks how i like it. My priest looks really good right now, i won't lie =P She's got the ilvl264 tier 10 stuff so it's all purple and yellow. Sadly my cloak doesn't match nicely >.< but i've accepted that. I even made my tabard match >.>

As for the helm, if i really like it, i'll show it, but other than that i often hide it so people can see more of my character (ie, i show my priests helm currently, but none of my other characters...oh wait..maybe my mage, but its just an engineering eye thing).

tbc annoyed me so much because the gear all looked like a circus side show while levelling =P Not to mention these ugly gear pieces replacing my 60 epics while they were just level 62 greens. >.<

Now...why do i like it so much? I don't know...a lot of wow is about aesthetics i think. Why else do enchants make our weapons all glowy and pretty? The glow doesn't help at all. It's a video game - we want things to look cool. I want my characters to look cool, to myself, and probably to a certain extent to others. For example, i love my zul'aman bear mount. Why? Partly because it's one of the coolest looking land mounts imo, and partly epeen. It's a rarer mount (well...relatively) and people know that.

[Moderator](#)
Heh, I know what you mean Hanna - some head pieces look awful. The topic of looks seems to key into that idea of Uniqueness again, which seems to be important to you irl as well right?

Christina, what would it mean to you if you had an ugly looking character then? It sounds as if quite a lot of it for you relates to other people knowing what you've got - a bling factor if you will, heh. Maybe a better way of putting it would be social kudos, people knowing you've put the work in, gone on certain raids, etc?

[Rowena](#)
I think aesthetics are a huge part of the game. Especially in such a social genre. Humans are designed to be that way =) We're social, and we're sight-oriented mammals, who rely on visual cues to know how to respond appropriately to other humans. So, having an attractive avatar is important to me. It's one reason I didn't play a Horde character, in addition to the other considerations. Night elf vs. Tauren; there was no contest.

Right now my biggest QQ is the T10 leather gear...it's downright dowdy compared to the earlier tier pieces, and other classes' current gear. Maybe they were trying to make it look more 'leathery' or something, but to me it just looks blurry and unfinished, with unattractive styling. And yes, it shows what I accomplished, so I do want to show it off! I want the 'Kingslayer' title for the same reason--It will mean I finished ICC.

I really liked my t8.5 gear with the 'Sailor Moon' stars--that's only the second time I've shown a helm. I even have a FigurePrints model of *[Character Name]*in the T8.5 that someone gave me for my birthday last summer. But I don't think I want one in the current tier set. I wonder what the gear designers had against druids this patch!

Prior to that, my favorite was the Sunwell gear from the heroics badges. To me, it looked very 'Native American', very pulled together, and the helm looked like a feathered headdress with the eagle's beak overshadowing the face but not hiding it. I thought the chest was really attractive, as well.

I wonder if helm display is gender-based? I've noticed in my guild that players who I know are male but playing female characters are more likely to display even an ugly helm that completely hides their character's face than the female players. Also, I know a few females who are playing male characters, and they tend to not show the helm. I don't have an answer, and my sample is too small to be anything other than anecdotal. And of the males playing male characters the helm is pretty random.

As far as the cloak goes, that is something I usually show, since the outfits rarely look complete otherwise.

I have an Aion account, and I have to admit one of the draws was their character creation. The game is just so pretty! I spent hours and hours making characters, one of each class, and raised them all to level 10, at which point they 'ascended', received their wings and could leave the starting area. (That was an attempt by NCSoft to thwart goldsellers, but unfortunately the game is plagued by them.) At any rate, in Aion, you can tweak the face of the characters in a way that WoW doesn't allow. Also, even the starter armor is pretty in Aion! And there is the ability to make your armor look like other armor models, dye it, etc., which allows a lot of customization. I don't play it often any more; I was playing weekends with a friend last fall, and we both went back to WoW when ICC came out. He told me it was really hard to play more than one MMO at a time (he used to play Everquest), and I have to say he is right. There's just too much involved in maintaining your characters within an economy.

[Christina](#)
Q: Christina, what would it mean to you if you had an ugly looking character then? It sounds as if quite a lot of it for you relates to other people knowing what you've got - a bling factor if you will, heh. Maybe a better way of putting it would be social kudos, people knowing you've put the work in, gone on certain raids, etc?

A: Well, some may say that all my characters are technically "ugly". I play horde, and none of them are blood elves (except a retired 39 twink lock). All of them are female, but they're troll, tauren, orc, and undead. I don't even want a belf, the stereotypically "pretty" horde race. I guess beauty is in the eye of the beholder? It's not that I have an aversion to "ugly" characters, I just want to like how they look. Like I said in the other thread, when I make characters, I think to myself, "if I was such and such race and class, how would I want to look?" and I go from there.

As for pixel bling or social kudos...perhaps to a certain extent. I do wear the kingslayer title on both my priest and druid I suppose as a way of subtly bragging about my achievements. Prior to that I wore the legionnaire title on my priest, i suppose to subconsciously communicate i'm "oldschool" (i'm self analysing and hypothesizing here.....this isn't definite). But sometimes that doesn't matter to me. The cool factor trumps the bling/epeen factor. For example, my druid's current land mount is the one that drops of anub'arak if you get tribute to insanity. This would technically be classified as an "epeen mount"...however, i've been farming sethekk halls almost daily since summer and the moment i get the raven hawk mount i plan on solely using that one because it is the awesomest looking land mount in the game, imo. Likewise, if i ever get the brewfest kodo to drop and win it, I'd prefer to use that one over the tribute wolf - because it *looks* cooler.

[Moderator](#)
Yah, MMOs are definitely social games - as I think I've mentioned, I doubt I'd have played this long if it weren't for WoW friendships.

I've been pondering the effect of the graphics types as well, I get the feeling that adjusts how you play the game. Eve online, for example, is staggeringly beautiful and I'd fly around in space just admiring the view. Warhammer is a lot dirtier than WoW, which obviously has quite a cartoony thing going on. I guess it depends on what ambience the game designers are going for.

It seems that it's a combination of kudos and cool then for both of you, with cool winning out - I was wondering if that's quite similar to real life, or whether different parameters work there?

Christina - you mentioned wanting to identify yourself as 'old school', why's that? I'm the same to be honest, though I doubt I'll ever get that particular title. Anyone else have the same thing going on? :)
[Mila](#)
Aesthetics are half the game for me. If it does not appeal to me visually, be it characters, locations, animations, etc, chances are I won't stay with it very long. Character looks are very important to me, but only so far is whether I personally like them. This does not have to mean they are cute to me, only that something about how they look pleases me. Ugly can be pleasing in some cases :) Beautiful can also be just as off-putting in some

cases. Mainly it depends on my vision of what a character should be. For example, I created a blood elf paladin, but was never quite happy with her hair. Soon as the barbershop came out, she got the formerly human style of long hair held back by a clasp at the nape, which to me is more practical for someone in up-close-and-personal combat. Milae thing for my troll DK, who now sports the rather spiky short Forsaken style. The same DK has the 'dead' look skin, and so she is rather gaunt and bony for a troll, but to me thats what a troll DK should look like ;). I have heard many times from my guildies, real-life pals, and random players that some of my toons are *ugly* to them. That's likely quite true, but does not matter to me what they think. I may not like Forsaken, or Tauren much either, but its up to everyone to play what they want to. I would never not roll with someone because their toon was not something I would personally pick LOL. And cool looking bling is always nice, but because I like cool looking bling :) If others like it too, great, but certainly is not the point of it for me.

[Christina](#)
Q: Christina - you mentioned wanting to identify yourself as 'old school', why's that? I'm the same to be honest, though I doubt I'll ever get that particular title. Anyone else have the same thing going on? :)

A: I suppose it's a certain pride element? Milae reason why people link achievements and epeen stroke when theirs came first or the "oh ya, well i got "of the nightfall" when you couldn't zerg faceroll it", etc.
Somehow someone who's played for 5 years is less of a noob than someone who's played for one? i dunno =P

[Moderator](#)
Mila - it sounds like it's a mix of aesthetics for you then, plus what feels right for you in terms of the class / race combination?

Yah, I've done the same re. letting people know I've been knocking around for a while - in the forums I used to reference old AV (pre-cross BGs, etc), etc. I've come to the conclusion (putting my psychological hat on) that there's a certain amount of social positioning going on. I think it's a pretty clear reflection of real life - fashion irl serves the same sort of purpose.

Fashion in MMOs, I sense a new research topic on the horizon! ;)

[Mila](#)
Yes, a combination of both. As to fashion in MMOs to reflect social positioning, then for me I guess its Rogues in sweat pants FTW? LOL

[Sarah](#)
For me the character needs to have a harmoneous look. That does note mean beautiful but the different aspects like skin color, face, hair color... need to make a good combination. Having achieved that I usually do not hide it behind a helmet ;-)
There are some exceptions where helmets look good (there is the reward for the wolf spirit quest chain which gives a nice wolf-head helmet) - in that case I show the helm, but mostly they just look horrible. E.g. I have seen a people in the t10 Warlock helmet which makes them look like a garden gnome ;-)

[Moderator](#)

Yup, I'm sure that apart from the set bonuses, that the visual impact of sets is as much a reason for people getting Tier items.

Patrick
Aesthetics are important. As much as I know what the various BiS items are... I just cannot bring myself to where them. They look absolutely hideous and completely clash. It's a vain why of thinking, but damnit... I'm the one who has to look at him!

Moderator
Hehe, since you're obviously raiding Patrick, do you wear those items when raiding or do you refuse to wear them all the time?

But why so against strange combinations? Is it because you have some ideas about how your character should look, or because you don't want others to see you like that? or both? :)

Patrick
Actually I don't that much. So I don't have a lot of gear upgrades flung at me. Usually I have access to only a couple items for each slot.

When trying to decide between option A and option B, I'll actually the LESSER item stat-wise over a nasty-ass looking piece that is actually better overall. Good example: the Triumph emblem off-set Healing Helms (mail vs plate). Mail is better... looks really bad. So I wear the plate one.

I know I have the option to turn the helm off (and believe me.. I did for T8), but at the same time I really want to be able to look at my character and like what I see. I don't want to look like a collection of junk walking around.

It's vanity I guess...

Moderator
Well, not necessarily vanity - I think plenty of players like to look good for a variety of reasons.

It sounds like there's elements of looking good in front of other players though?

Patrick
It's probably an extension of gear-score. In coordinated gear / matching tier set, you LOOK like you know what you're doing. Just like GS though it doesn't mean squat, though people put a lot of merit in it.

Moderator
Yah, there's a difference between the social elements of WoW I feel, and the action side. In the former you can wander around looking good but without having to prove yourself, though often people invariably do try to.

Bethan
The look of the game is very important, because if the game is visually appealing, I think it is easier to become immersed. My characters are all pretty by my standards. Even when I created my Draenei I made her as pretty as I could. My characters looking good is the

reason I will never play a dwarf or gnome. I never wear a helm on any of my toons because it would be a shame to hide their faces. Even though there are a limited set of facial/hair/color options, I think after time your friends recognize you when near you because you look different than many others. Your particular combo of face/hair/skin and gear is going to be different than someone else's. (I am sure it helps that your name is a different color too)

[Moderator](#)
How come you never made an ugly character Bethan?

That being said, I can't imagine any of us makes a character that we don't like the look of in any way...

[Bethan](#)
Well, if am going to play this game for long periods of time, where I control this character, she has to be pretty! :P Seriously though, I don't know, I know that there are other races that would be awesome to play but the thought of looking at them for extended periods of time, the thought of me playing them, just doesn't interest me. That being said, I have messed around with the undead, and was able to make one I thought was cute! Well, as cute as an undead can be. (She had purple hair!) I just can't bring myself to create a gnome or dwarf lol.

Question 3 – Real World Transposing

[Moderator](#)
So, another topic for you to digest - I'd also like to encourage our quieter members of the group to voice their thoughts - everyone's point of view is interesting! :)

In the first round of research, it became apparent that for some people they wanted to replicate themselves in the game - either physically (so the character looked like them) or mentally (so that the character could be seen as their representative in the virtual world), or indeed, a combination of both or neither. This was particularly apparent with people's first (serious) character. For some of course, there were no such thoughts.

For the first question then, have it become apparent to you that you've intentionally or unintentionally replicated yourself (in whatever capacity) in the game environment?

[Mike](#)
It really only became apparent when I thought about question #1. I tried to look at it from a point of view as if this was a study, and I found out a few things I didn't realize.

[Moderator](#)
This point actually came from the Character creation thread, but I thought I'd jot down some thoughts here as it seems more appropriate.

A few people have mentioned that their character represents them a lot, others that the 'personality' of the characters is that of the player's but the skin is the that of the character itself. Going back to this idea of replication, I was wondering whether people realised later on down the line that they'd created themselves in the game or whether it was intentional? From my own experience, I'd say I realised after a while that I'd put myself into (some) of my characters.

[Christina](#)
i'd say just personality is closely replicated. my character's don't exactly look like me, however they do represent appearances that I like.

Hmmm...actually, my first character (the UD mage) has short purple hair....and at the time of creation, I may or may not have had short purple hair...I can't remember! LoL, but regardless, it's things I like. I never had a blue trihawk though (my troll priest)

[Mila](#)
I think my mesmer in Guild Wars ended up being me, but then, as one that I played a lot, how could she not? To a lesser extent, the same has happened for my assassin in GW, and my troll rogue in WoW. I guess I am not super good at RPing the characters for significant periods of time, so the ones I play the most/hardest its just easier for them to act like me. I think I am lazy at heart.

[Moderator](#)
Something I've picked up from the previous round of research is that for some people at least, there's a distinction to be made between 'manipulation' of the existing real world self, and the wholesome 'construction' of a new self in the game environment.

Obviously for some, and it sounds like Christina is in this category, all of her characters are pretty 'her' whereas for others, their characters represent different sides or are played at different times.

This distinction I've outlined above goes something like this: for some people they're perfectly happy with their offline 'selves' but sometimes (in an escapist sort of way) wish to drop the serious side occasionally, and MMO allows them to do this. So there's no construction going on, but simply manipuation of what's already there.

For others (and they might well be perfectly happy with their RL self as well), they like the idea of creating a new 'self' to play, so some wholesale construction goes on.

[Patrick](#)
My characters aren't avatars. There really isn't any connection between other than the fact that I control them.

I did create an RP character once. When I played him, I shared his emotions and feelings. It really directed the game-play and how he interacted with the world.

Important thing to note here: it was HIS emotions that I was experiencing, not the other way around. There was nothing of me in him at all. It was a very surreal experience.

[Moderator](#)
That does sound like a weird experience to go through - how did you managed to dissociated yourself so fully? tis impressive

On a related note, has anyone had the experience of feeling like they're 'in' the game? I.e. so immersed that you lose track of time and your surroundings?

I have a high level of empathy and a vivid imagination. In his back story I had written about how he could hear a voice calling to him, a beautiful voice.. this of course was Lady Sylvannas.

It just so happened that when I reached UC for the first time and was exploring around, that I heard her singing her Lament..

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UXhx40DcU6Y

Went to her chamber and watched, was almost in tears by the time it was done.

IRL I've had similar incidents. Tragic / emotiional / triumphant moments that have taken place during the Olympics (most likely amplified due to how much time goes into preparation for only a tiny window of opportunity) is one example. Lyrics of certain songs is another (applying them to my own life).

Bethan
My very first character, my main was slightly like me. I created the length and color of her hair and her pale skin just like mine. Other than that, she just is. She was my first toon, and it was my first ever MMO, so I tried to make my character like myself, creating a character that was "different" was a weird concept to me. However, since it has been more than 2 years now, I have created many other toons, most notably Draenei and Night Elves who certainly look nothing like me with their bluish skin and pigtails, and the long ears and long purple hair. I have since learned it is perfectly okay to have a toon that does not correlate to myself in real life. Hope that made sense.

Moderator
Sounds interesting - how come you created a version of you first of all? And could you explain that bit re. it being 'perfectly okay' - did you think it might not be? :)

Bethan
Well, it is sort of hard to explain but the thought of playing a game, in a virtual reality, with foreign surroundings and bizzare characters seemed weird to me. A human was obviously the character most like me and kind of helped me ease into playing an MMO. I thought I would hate it, the game as a whole, I had heard of MMO's and remember thinking how silly they were, so when I made my very first character I just went with what seemed the most normal at the time. Since then, becoming very invested and loving the game a great deal, I know now my initial thoughts regarding MMO's and the people who played them were very wrong. I just think that perhaps for those playing an MMO for the first time, creating a human is the most identifiable character and for myself it just felt natural to create her to look like myself as much as I could anyway.

Question 4 – Changes over Time

Moderator
This topic relates to how the relationship with your character has changed over time. Again, from the first phase of research (sounding like a broken record now, heh), some people started off thinking of a character in a certain way but as time went on their real

world identity re-asserted itself and any originality the character had was lost.

Has anyone else experienced this? It might also be that originally you had multiple characters each with their own 'self', but as time has gone on they've tended towards a common identity - if you get my drift, one that is more akin to your own?

Or, maybe they never had separate identities in the first place? :)

[Christina](#)
mine never had personalities separate from mine. I was never one to "RP" them. Their identities (apart from me) are linked to their appearance I'd say, which are still different.

[Moderator](#)
Ah...now you've confused me there. ;)

How can they have similar identities if that's linked to their appearance, which is different?

Maybe I just misunderstood...
:)

Edit: Ah, you may have clarified this in thread 3, add to it if you wish though. :)

[Christina](#)
hmm...i think i have explained elsewhere, but i'll try again.

I'm not one to role-play personalities. All of my characters in game have my personality. If people like or dislike a quality, it's because they like or dislike that quality in *me*. My characters are all me, personality wise. The only identifying thing seperating them is linked to their respective roles in game (raid mechanically) and appearance (they're all difference races...and even if they weren't, i'd make them look different).

I was actually thinking about something this morning, but I'm not really sure which topic it'd go under. It has to do with in game identity though - even when I'm on different characters, people often have one name they refer to me as. For many people, this is "*[Character Name]*" since that's my main. Although several people refer to me as "*[Character Name]*" since that's the first character they met me on. Still, there are some that call me "*[Character Name]*". However, whatever these people refer to me as, they refer to me as that regardless of what character I'm on. So, I suppose that just affirms that my identity in game is more linked to me as a person, than to my character. Or maybe it's less confusing for them =P

[Moderator](#)
Yah, I know what you mean Christina - I've got a few characters in active usage but Guild members invariably refer to me via my main character. As you say, it seems to infer that players (generally) link to the person behind the screen, and not the character actually online.

[Christina](#)
i suppose it's different on RP servers (or at least ones that attempt to live up to their description), but ya....mine's pvp.

[Sarah](#)
Same on RP server - I always get greeted under my main's name, regardless the character I'm logging in. Probalby also because I'm not hugely into roleplaying, though, so that might explain it ;-)
Same with my husband.
What changed for me was also the role of the character - started my warrior as arms and do mostly tanking nowadays. Started priest as healer but find dps more fun... Still, the constant over all the characters and their evolution - it's me playing them, and the chat entries are my thoughts and opinions, not the characters'

[Patrick](#)
It isn't my relationship with my toon that has changed, but rather my relationship with the class. For Vanilla and TBC all I wanted to do was hit things really hard. It was all about DPS.

Video games = pew pew, right?

Anyways.. on a whim I switched to healing. It has really changed the game for me. I feel as though I am more in touch with my class and understand it better. Milae for when I ultimately ditched my DPS spec and took up tanking as well.

Hmm..

Now that I think about it, maybe the way I have evolved as a player and my choices of play style are a reflection of my growth IRL. I've gone from a fresh-out-of-school young man to a family man with a lot of responsibilities. Maybe the decision to become a healer and tank reflect that. I recognize more with protection roles.

Could be my character reflects me more than I thought...

[Moderator](#)
Heh, I think it's a break through! ;)

That's interesting stuff though Patrick, the change between your game characters activities and your real life ones. What is it about the healer and tank roles that appeals to you then?

Can anyone else identify a similar pattern in their lives?

Or indeed any pattern between character role, character creation, etc and their real lives?

[Patrick](#)
What attracts me about them is...

a) Healer: I get to save them. Even though they may do the stupidest things and may not even try to save themselves, I'm there to carry them through it safely.

b) Tank: I am a protector. I put myself ahead of everyone else and try to take all of the abuse. They focus there aggression on me, not my team (heh.. almost wrote "family" there).

i too am attracted to the healer and tank roles. my priest has 2 heal specs, my druid a heal and bear spec, and my dk a tank and dps spec (working on tank spec being main). my original character, my mage (only pure dps class i have) is sitting at 73.

i'd say this does reflect my RL personality. my meyers-brigg typology is infj - often called the "protector" or "counselor". Here are a couple sentences i pulled from a google search on that just now:

"Beneath the quiet exterior, INFJs hold deep convictions about the weightier matters of life. Those who are activists -- INFJs gravitate toward such a role -- are there for the cause, not for personal glory or political power.
INFJs are champions of the oppressed and downtrodden. They often are found in the wake of an emergency, rescuing those who are in acute distress. "

IRL, i work for a charity organization with inner city at-risk youth. In game, i either want mobs to beat on me, or for me to heal those the mobs are beating on. i'll let you make the correlations, as close or as a stretch they are.

(as an addition, if you're into personality types....my N sometimes is an S since it's usually just by a point or two...it's very close =P)

So, for both of you then there's quite a few elements of your RL selves in the characters you play...

Do you think it's easier to show these elements in a game setting, as opposed to real life? Or if not easier to show, easier to access at least.

nah, i wouldn't say they're easier to tap into in the game as opposed to RL. how i play in game, and what roles i take, are more just a natural extension of who i am and what sorts of things i gravitate to.

It's not that I consciously try to display these traits in game. As you could see from my earlier posts, I wasn't actually aware that it was happening. I believe it's more of RL subconsciously guiding me to play in a certain style as it's what comes naturally: be a caregiver, be a protector.

...I've been really thinking hard about respec'ing back into RET lately. I wouldn't assume that something has happened in my RL that is causing this.

...unless it's that I'm trying to alleviate some of my heavy burdens and responsibilities that I live with on a day to day basis. Can't drop the RL ones, but I can drop some in-game ones.

DAMNIT!!! RL is getting in the way of my care-free gaming! XD

Hanna
I played a tank in Everquest,
A ranged DPS in WoW,
and a healer in Warhammer.
I like my healer WAY more than I liked either of the other classes. Part of it I know is because I love the Warhammer game so much more than I ever did the other two, but aside from that there is something about the healer that fits me. I think its because I spend the majority of the time in defense mode. I do not spend a lot of time "hitting" enemies--unless I am being attacked I just focus on my teamates and keeping them afloat. Although I played the first two classes well, I played them nothiing like I can play my zealot. The mechanics of the class fit my play style and my thought pattern much more adequately than the others seem to.

Moderator
Well, I think there's a big correlation in how people play the game as an overall style (that fits with their personality, etc) and how they play as a result of day-to-day experiences. Not that works for everyone, or all the time...

Bethan
Much like Christina said, my characters are all "me" and since most of them are in the same guild, regardless of which toon I am on, I am greeted by guildies and people on my friends list (except those I only friended on one toon for whatever reason, and don't know me on my main - usually because I don't like them much lol) with my main's name, "Hey *[Character Name]*" even if I am on *[Character Name]*or *[Character Name]*.

Moderator
Ah huh, so there's not much variation in the personality of your chars then and that's reflected in the way you're addressed?

I noticed there's a lot of K's there too. Or is that just coincidence?
:)

Bethan
Nope, my characters are all just a vehicle when I am behind the keyboard. I use different characters for different farming or daily needs, but I am always myself when chatting with people.

I have always had an obsession with K names. Over the years, I have had cats named Kismet, Keifer and Karma, and my daughters names are *[Name]*and *[Name]*. I never gave it much thought when naming my characters, I just always sought out a name beginning with K. I recently created a character named *[Character Name]*and I remember all of my friends saying, "omg you threw me off, she doesn't start with a K, I wasn't sure it was you". So I know it is a trend that sticks out even to my friends :)

Question 5 – Escape / Immortality

Moderator

One thing that came across for me was that for many people, including myself, the game is an escape - a means of getting away from it all and just chilling out. It also occurred to me that MMOs provide a curious variation over real life - in that effectively you're immortal and never age. I find myself wondering whether this pseudo-immortality provides a sense of timelessness which is inherently appealing, one which is quite seductive in a way because whatever happens in real life, the virtual one will always be there, as will you...

There's two real topics here, but I think they're related. Feel free to discuss both / either - Escapism and/or Immortality. :)

[Mike](#)
For sure, without a doubt, I play this game to escape real life. I immerse myself in a completely made up world and just get in a zone where I don't even want to be bothered by a phone call. It's a way to get away from work, people IRL who bug you, or even when there it's raining outside and there isn't anything good on TV and you haven't bought a good book recently. WoW is always there(except on tuesdays). It is absolutely worth the $15 a month. I have met a lot of friends, even met a few in real life, and some that live close. That in itself makes it worth playing this game. I started playing just because I was tired of the X-box. I got "addicted" to it when I started making friends and playing with others. I sort of think of WoW as an extremely fancy AIM. I can chat with more people and kill NPCs at the same time.

[Moderator](#)
Yah, I know what you mean - I play a lot less than I used to, although it's probably still once a day. After a day at work, settling in WoW for a heroic or two and chatting to friends is a really nice way to wind down a bit.

I can't deny that I like the fact that I know it's there; when I'm at work sometimes the idea of being able to kick back in WoW feels quite relaxing in itself. :)

[Rowena](#)
I definitely use the game as an escape, in the same way I've used books, television, and just about any other activity that kept me from thinking about unpleasant things in my free time. This particular form of escapism is particularly rewarding because it is so interactive. It's creative, yet mundane in the same way that crafting a woodworking project might be...a certain amount of planning, then a certain amount of following set rules, zen-like moments of physically handling the wood, etc. The difference of course being that there is no real-world product, rather an idea that we carry around in our heads and display on a screen. So to me it is more a hobby than a game, since you don't actually 'win' at WoW, you just play it forever. (that's the immortality part, lol!)

[Christina](#)
I use it as escapism to a certain extent too. Ironically, this form of "escaping RL stress" often has stresses unique to it. I've been in positions of leadership in guilds, raids, etc and having to deal with "in game drama".....not exactly stress-free escapism =/

Right now it's relatively stress free, other than trying to beat <Rampage> on hardmodes, but that's a different story =P

[Mila](#)

Definitely escapism. Life is full of stresses, and since I am an introvert, I much prefer to recharge my batteries in the comfort of my home :). WoW can have its own stresses (idiots in PUGs, trying to get into groups where gear score is the entry criteria, etc etc. But sometimes, just having a different type of stress is all thats needed to unwind for the RL ones. Plus it helps knowing that the game ones you can walk away from at any time :)

I don't really think of immortality as an aspect to why I enjoy MMOs. I think chatting online with so many players makes it QUITE appraent what age bracket the typist is in most times. Besides, if a player stops playing does anyone know whether their character is still there? I would rather say that its the anonomity thats more appealing, in that no one you play with knows your actual stresses, or whether you are fat or thin, or playing in your PJs or whatever, unless you tell them.

[Moderator]
Heh, I like your woodworking example Rowena - I suppose that brings up a question for me - do you think there are any differences between woodworking (following your example) and playing WoW? Or, to put it in general terms, in the way we act (in the environment) and interact (with others) is there any difference between the real world, and the game world?

It's true though, WoW, WAR, AoC, etc all have their own stresses. I'm not sure whether any of you have played Eve Online but it's an extremely complicated game and takes a lot of time and effort to progress - certainly not a stroll in the park.

Anonymity is an interesting one though, and something which has been mentioned before - I think quite a few people like the ability to walk away if wanted, with no particular repercussions.

[Rowena]
Alex, I guess the 'ability to walk away' is inherent in any leisure activity, but I really think that 1. the whole 'anonymity of the internet' thing is self-deception; and 2. 'real-life vs. game-life' is a false dichotomy.

The internet fools people into a false sense of anonymity. We can be anonymous to a degree, but really, how anonymous is it? Once we become comfortable in a given zone, be it a forum, a guild, or a neighborhood bar, we tend to let our guards down. We share email addresses, IM addresses, phone numbers, mailing addresses...The only way to truly be anonymous is to not participate at all.

And in the same way, game life *is* real life. We are real people sitting at real keyboards and monitors sharing a series of activities. We talk to each other on vent. Some of you may even have webcams going. Those activities take up our time, our psyches, and our money. (I've spent more money on having a raid-ready computer than I want to admit.)

So, that's why I was able to compare woodworking and WoW--or crocheting and WoW, for that matter. They are leisure activities. They hold our interest because we humans like to work our brains and they draw on all the resources we used to use for survival. In the real world. Where it rains and gets cold and then gets hot and dry and there's no food and and and .... I'd rather play WoW!

[Christina]
i love crocheting...

Heh, not sure you kill orcs with a crochet...maybe a crochet needle if you want at it hammer and tongs (so to speak). :)

I understand what you mean Rowena - we are real people that happen to be in a virtual environment. It's the variation from RL that makes it interesting.

What is so appealing in WoW - you can do it for ten minutes or five hours, you do not need to leave the house or get dressed or need to clean away things afterwards. It takes you mind of a lot of things that happened and which you should not take into your evening. A good book, nice movie can do the same. A night out with friends as well, though it needs more preparation (arranging dates, getting there and back...)
There is usually always something interesting going on ingame, but you are always free to participate or not (as opposed to e.g. plaing in a soccer team as a hobby). So it is complete freedom.
A few days ago, I was in a foul mood, so I considered starting a new character which nobody knew so I did not have to talk to anybody and could still get a bit of relaxation out of the evening ;-)
Being immortal is not really the point for me. Actually I would consider it a good idea if deaths brought about a certain penalty (apart from repair costs).

That phrase 'complete freedom' really rings true for me Sarah, and I suspect might do for a few people. It seems to me that the freedom to do as you wish - whether it's raiding, levelling up a char, going fishing, etc is something that sets it apart from other forms of entertainment (though they have advantages too).

I guess my point here is that the interactivity involved is attractive, so you're creating your own entertainment in the way that you can't achieve by watching TV but can, to a certain extent, when reading a book.

Alex, I think you nailed it--it's interactive entertainment. When I started playing WoW, I was spendinig every evening in front of the TV. I was horribly depressed, and the one-way entertainment certainly didn't help. As Sarah mentioned, MMO's are something you can do without leaving home, and it engrosses you as well. My other hobbies like painting, reading, etc., are 'singular' in that no one else participates in them, I do them alone. But MMO's are as singular or social as you choose to fit your mood.

Yah, I get the feeling (from both my playing and from what people have said), that the interaction engrosses people to a certain extent and draws them into the game, so you're immersed within it.

And, whilst WoW is essentially a linear game, it's got many linear paths going simultaneously.

So, a linear game with many linear paths going simultaneously...which allows horizontal game play across the linear paths...maybe that's the appeal, kind of like playing a stringed instrument, where you can jump from high level toons to low, from pvp to pve to rp, from questing to raiding to gathering and crafting, and all the social interweavings. Hmmm.

Moderator
Yah, I think so - it's what gives MMOs their longevity - the multiple activities people can do in the one game.

Referring back to my Phd stuff (bound to happen eventually ;)), I guess it means it allows people to show or express different parts of themselves through these multiple lines.

Patrick
The game is escapism for me, but more in the sense that I can just let my RL worries be put on hold for even just a few minutes.

Playing the game, helping run the FB group, actively posting / mentoring on the Blizz forums, keeping up on the latest news... all of that serves to allow me to refocus my mind and attention on something else for a while. Work, family, money... that can pause for now...

Bethan
WoW is definitely a way to escape. The ability to jump on and see who is on and check mail for 5 minutes, or do some herbing for an hour, or perhaps hop into a pug raid for 3 hours, no matter what your time restraints, you can always find some productive way to use it in WoW, and you can walk away at anytime which makes it so appealing to so many people. The greatest thing I think about WoW is you can be a casual player who just does heroics when they have time and chats with friends, or trolls trade chat, or a hardcore raider working on ICC hardmodes and still get the same level of joy from the game. It is so good at catering to so many different types of people.

Moderator
Is your escapism a way of escaping RL for a bit, or escapism as in playing in a virtual world full of monsters?

I was just wondering how much it linked to RL.
:)

Bethan
I think for myself, WoW is just an escapism into a virtual world, as I don't really play to escape from anything in RL. Just a hobby really, a very time consuming one that I enjoy a great deal. It also helps that my husband and I play and raid together, as it saves us a lot of money lol. When we are bored, instead of going shopping and spending money we don't really have, we can play WoW.

Question 6 – Emotions

Moderator

Well, it's a pretty wide ranging topic, but an important one I think - how do you feel about the game, what do your characters mean to you, what do you think about gaming in your life? Anything you want it to be really.

I'll put down a bit about my perspective...gaming has been an important part of my life for a long time now and I'd refer to myself as a gamer. It's not the be alll and end all though, just a pleasant addition. That being said, I'd say I was addicted at one point but shook that off over time. In terms of my characters and WoW (my current game) I'm substantially more attached to my characters than to the game - if I could transpose them to the next game I play I'd be very happy.

But, in a way, I can. When I started playing Warhammer I created characters that had similar attributes to those in WoW. Strangely I couldn't give (most of) them the same names because I felt that they had their own lives, and so couldn't exist in two virtual environments at once (go figure...). :)

There was one that existed in both games though, my favourite character in WoW - a grumpy priest character called *[Character Name]*- he's not the best equipped and only just hit 80 a couple of weeks ago so by those standards he's well behind the curve. He is however, my favourite. He could exist in both places at once - as a shadow priest in WoW and as a magus in WH. Why he could, and the others couldn't, I'm not sure...but it was obviously important that he did. :)

Anyway, the general question then (and please feel free to be as general or specific as you wish) is - how do you real life emotions link with the game (the game itself, gaming general, a specific character, etc)?

[Mila](#)

Like you Alex, I refer to myself as a gamer, I have been gaming pretty much my entire life, although only in the home context when they released home consoles and home computers (ya, I am another one 'that old'). Its not all I am, but it is a big part of who I am, which is in the broader definition, a geek. I like technology. I like emerging trends in technology. I like alternative art forms (comics, tattoos, and the like). I am big into Sci-fi and fantasy in general. I have a strong artistic side (I write, paint, do stained glass, etc) and to me, RPGs fit right in with that. And I think gaming in general is a great way to keep the mind active, and in MMOs, it even keeps me more social than perhaps my natural tendency is. All good things.

I do become attached to my characters, and miss them when I move to the next game. The first time was hard, but now its getting easier as I know the new game will have new favourites for me to become attached to :). And change is good. I still occasionaly go back to the old games, and 'visit' with my old toons, and I keep pics of them all for posterity.

When I first started MMOs, I can say I was addicted. It was such a novel experience, the social aspect, that I felt I was 'missing out on fun' when I was not playing. Now I know thats not the case, and I am more casual about my play time, althought its still pretty much daily that I login, even if its only to say "hi" to the guidlies that are on and to check my auctions.

I love all my characters, but still a few get special attention (I seem to have this thing for the dagger wielding ones....) yet all of them get play time, and I often get urges to play particular ones. In that respect I guess I feel in certain moods and certain characters best fit the moods. My trolls (rogue, dk, and mage) are ones I tend to graviate to when I've

had very trying days and want to strangle people. LOL. They are my bloodthirsty ones. Other days I feel very mellow and relaxed, and then I am more likely to be playing one of my priests, druid, shamman, or even pally, in heal mode. When I am feeling a bit less than good company, thats usually the times I am on my hunter or warlock, mainly becuase they do not have steady running mates from my guild/friends list. And when I want to be REALLY alone, then I don't even play on my regular server, and head off to an alternate one where even the guildies can't find me. But since most of those alts are under level 10, I rarely want to be that alone ;)

[Moderator](#)
Mila, it sounds like for you, MMOs are nicely integrated into your life and form part of the concept of 'you' as it were.

I wanted to pick up on one point in particular, you said you play certain characters depending on your mood - i.e. the rogue when in a bad mood, etc. How come there's a distinction there? and what would happen if you played your priest (for example) when in an annoyed mood?

As an addendum to that, I was wondering if people don't like some of their characters to be seen in a bad light? I've talked to a player who didn't like playing his shaman when in a bad mood, because he was more likely to play badly (in a raiding environment) and he didn't want that character to be associated with that. Bad mood was reserved for PvP for him. :)

[Mila](#)
For me when I am in an angry/frustrated/otherwise less than stellar mood, every little thing will (and usually does) annoy the heck out of me. Also, I am much more easily flustered, distracted, and thrown off stride. These are NOT good things when playing a healer (or a tank) where you need to be on top of things, and not prone to distractions. At these times, I am much better at just pure DPS, where a moment of annoyance/distraction/flustering does not usually make or break the outcome for the party.

That's not to say I only play these during the "right' moods, because that's not the case. But if I am coming from a bad day, I may be more choosy about who my healers run with. If I am having a mellow day, then my "killers" might be more inclined to go on PUG raids.

If I know I am going to be frustrated at the drop of a pin because I am already at my limits, why would I deliberately put myself up for more of that in my 'escapism'? On the other side, if I am having a 'nothing will phase me oh so happy day' why not share that and put it to good use and maybe make some others happy?

[Sarah](#)
Hehe - I can understand Mila. PUGs are reserved for good days (danger is too high you end up in an even fouler mood afterwards). When the day has been rotten, I will not tank or heal either, but do dps and be done with it. Or just do some dailies to get money. Generally, I'd say WoW is a hobby, but work, family and friends always have higher priority. So does keeping a reasonable level of cleanliness around the rooms ;-)
That said, as a rule, I'm only online, when I have completed my chores. WoW is a kind of reward then and a way of relaxing. Funnily enough, the desire to play varies. There are

days when you could just drop everything and head back into the game (usually after something went really well the previous day or when you are levelling a character you enjoy) and then there are days when you watch TV instead and never miss a thing. Cannot really tell what defines the mood. Usually the TV programme is just so bad, you rather play ;-)

[Mila](#)
It also depends on just how drained I am at the end of the day... Some days, even logging in to WoW is too much of an effort. Thats a TV night :) And I read lots too, and if its a good book, not even the lure of WoW can draw me away. :)

And yes, house cleaning... that sort of has a lower priorty now than it once did. Oh well... Least I not a super messy person.

[Rowena](#)
zomg, people who understand how i play!

I keep refering to my 'closet full of dolls' that MMO's have become for me...and that truly is how I play them. Just like Mila and Sarah said, which ones I play depends on the mood I'm in. Since I am an officer in a raiding guiild, I have a weeknight commitment, but on the weekends I can choose to do whatever. That's when I pull out a non-main 'doll'.

I can still log onto vent and chat with people if I want, or just go off and be totally alone. Since over time my bank alts have become known to various friends, I also have toons on several different servers, that let me actually be anonymous in a new environment. I even have one alt that has amassed over 1k gold just hanging around in Stormwind stalking Li'l Timmy for his white kitten. If I ever feel the urge to level a toon on that server, I have plenty of startup gold! I've rolled on RP, RP-PVP and PVP servers, and eventually would like to explore some of the different types of play, when raiding takes a hiatus.

Like Mila, I also have gone through an 'addiction' period with WoW, where logging in was the most important thing I did. I was well-aware when I was going through it, and knew it was in response to a real-life situation that I was working through. I really needed a complete emotional break from a situation, and WoW gave me that. I also knew that it was a situation (and 'addiction') that would run its course, which it eventually did. My play time is much more relaxed now, in that I log in for my raid and officer commitments, and the rest of my playtime now simply depends on whether I feel like it. Sometimes I just feel like watching tv or puttering around my house instead.

[Moderator](#)
It sounds like there's a health interplay between real world mood and how people are playing then? By 'how' I mean which characters, what they do, which servers, etc.

It seems to link back to the social referencing (or Others) topic a bit as well - i.e. who you want to play with and how you want to be seen at that particular moment.
[Mila](#)
I think we choose many things based on mood- color and styles of clothing, TV shows or movies, the friends we want hang out with on a given day, whether to do the dishes or laundry today, etc. Our gaming *skins* are no different. For me it comes down more to what play style do I feel up for, rather than how I want to be seen. Unless you mean

WHETHER I want to be seen by anyone who knows my in-game characters, as for sure I have times when I do not want to be seen at all.

[Christina](#)
hmmm.. i think i'm a bit different in that my characters don't really reflect a specific mood i'm in. Sometimes, i'm in the mood to play on character over another, but it's not that a said mood reflect a said character.

more generally in the topic though, i'm very emotionally attached to my characters. a while back, i rerolled on another server and made another troll priest (so ya, technically 2 80 troll priests, but one i don't really play anymore...i went back to my first and main - moldycheese). i made the second one look different and with a different name because as much as i love my main, i couldn't make a duplicate of her, as the second one would always be just a copy, if that makes sense.

also in terms of real life emotion linked with the game, one of the main reasons i'm "addicted" is because of the mmo element, which equates to friendships with other people - so out of a fantasy world came real emotions. also, as i've alluded in another thread, i've gone through times where i've experienced rl stress as a result of crap and drama in game (i always end up in officer/leadership roles it seems). sometimes my virtual world is more stressful than my real world.

[Moderator](#)
Yes indeed, sometimes the desire to not been seen at all can drive game play. I have a few characters that only a small select group know about.

Christina - I was wondering, as I read it, you don't apply a particular mood to a particular character, but you play depending on your mood? If it's not character specific, what does your choice of character to play center on?

It's also interesting how characters can have a hierarchy amongst themselves - as Christina was saying, her first priest is the main in comparison to the second. The reality is though that although characters may have a pecking order and have some kind of presence, we're the ones that are applying all of these attributes - it's the how's and why's of that that's interesting. :)

Heh, it does sound like your virtual world is more stressful than the real one Christina but I presume there's enough rewards to carry on playing? :)

In a similar vein, I guess we can all identify moments of boredom in the game that were grind(ed) through for some gain. (Grinding motes of fire whilst reporting bots springs to mind for me). :)

[Mila](#)
Ya, grinding mats can be a bit boring for sure. But pretty much all of mine have pushed their profs so that they can be geared appropriately (or gear others in the stable appropriately). That was not so bad, as nothing like taking on things above your level for excitement) but now its not so challenging for my LW to go gather skins. My herbalists and miners are still challenged, as all are maxed and gather for the max BS/Alchemist/Scribes but none are above lvl 72 yet. Boredom for me mainly comes

when I am on all by myself, and have to decide what to do, when most of my toons run with others...

Christina
i don't know if it's that it's a temperment mood so much as a "i feel like dpsing for a change" kind of mood (which is actually quite rare).

and yes, there are enough rewards to keep me going i guess....that and the whole addiction thing... >.<

Patrick
I wish I had more L80 characters, or at least my DPS spec back on occasions. There are times when something in the real-world just makes me want to hit something was a really big hammer.

Actually... more often than not... it's somebody I've come across in game that's done it.

Moderator
Yah, the interaction between the game and player is interesting stuff. PvP really makes my annoyed sometimes - so much so that I stop playing...on Earthen Ring Horde never seems to defend - very frustrating! ;)

The question for me is, why do I let a virtual event annoy me so much?

Answers on a postcard...
;)

Patrick
It likely upsets you because you can't do anything about it.

You see it happening.. you see what's going wrong. You could fix it. Heck, you probably try via /battleground chat ("Why are you fighting on the roads?", "Don't stop until you reach the flag", "KILL THE DAMN HEALER!!!", "Don't bother with FWG... NO! DON'T CAP IT!!!"

Moderator
heh, I don't bother in BGs so much anymore...

It's interesting to see myself get annoyed by a virtual event though; but i guess all events are real in the mind, if not irl.

Hanna
I have only been playing MMO's for about 7 years. There have been fluctuations in my life in that time where I played for hours every single day, which might last for weeks or months...and then times where I played only a couple of hours a week. Sometimes that depended on what was going on in my RL, other times it just was a matter of what I felt like. Right now, even though I still dearly love the game Warhammer--I have accomplished the majority of stuff that is currently out, so I reserve my play for weekends only. I have a fresh outlook on the game from being away from it all week, my RL stuff is getting the attention it deserves, and I do not feel the irritability I once felt (in

the back of my mind I would get irriated thinking RL issues were keeping me from my game, a few times I even caught myself grinding my teeth, I wanted to play so badly) Once I noticed I was doing that I put my foot down. I have seen gamer addiction at its worst and I vowed in the begining I would never allow that to happen to me, especially because I have small children. Finding a balance between 90% RL and 10% gaming has now become my niche and is the perfect place for me. Others would probably be more comfortable with a different percentage, but for me--mine is just where it needs to be.

[Moderator](#)
Right, so it's been a process of finding the best 'emotional' point for gaming in your life then?

[Hanna](#)
I guess you could say 'emotional', although I was thinking more along the lines of "being on the MMO wagon" lol!!

[Bethan](#)
I love WoW, I love it too much and I know it. My playtime probably averages out to 10 hours a day every day. It is a serious addiction and I know it. My characters mean the world to me, especially my main character. She is the one I work for all of the achievements on, and whose gear means the most to me, and whose inventory always has to be perfect. Part of it is OCD, but part of it is just showing a level of care and dedication to her. I still don't really consider myself a gamer. I am a hardcore WoW player, but not a gamer. If WoW were to vanish tomorrow I don't think I would ever get attached to another game, since WoW is the ONLY MMO I have ever played. I also get irritated when someone tells me I should check out another game. It feels like cheating to even think about getting wrapped up in another time consuming game other than WoW.

[Moderator](#)
It sounds like you can only see yourself as playing WoW then, how would you feel if they shut down the servers, etc?

[Bethan](#)
I would probably cry. The thought of my main, Kaer, being lost in the abyss of cyber space forever is very sad to me. I know at the end of the day, Blizzard owns everything, everything I invested time in, energy in, poured love into, but for now, she is MY character. If you were writing a story for two and a half years, and lost it in a fire, gone, all the originals, and had to rewrite it from scratch, chances are your rewrite just wouldn't be the same as your original. It may be so devastating that you didn't even care to rewrite it. All that time and effort gone. I realize that is pretty deep from a person who doesn't even RP but Kaer is my masterpiece. :)

Question 7 – Other people

[Moderator](#)
The last of the new topics for a while, this is about other people. Again it's pretty general, so I'd like to specify it into two areas - 1. Friendships and 2. Social referencing.

As we all know, MMOs are potentially very sociable places. Obviously you don't have to

chat to people, but Guilds, Raids and theoretically groups all offer a place for social interaction. Being this in mind then, how important are friendships to you in the context of game playing? Do they make a difference?

Continuing on from that, how much do you reference other people in the game? This one is slightly trickier, since you might not actually talk to the person themselves. In this situation I'm referring to thoughts or feelings you might have about other people - about how they're playing, their class or race, what someone has said.

[Mike](#)

As you can probably tell from an earlier post, I am a bit elitist. I am in and end game guild that is working on hard modes in ICC atm. I have been at the very top (BG rank #4) in arenas, and I'm a justicar(exalted with all the BG factions). I have no problem using my experience to call people out for not doing what they are supposed to, at least in my guild. If someone messes up, i very vocally let them know, and expect them to do the same if I mess up. Rarely are feelings hurt. The problem is usually corrected immediately and we down the boss. If the problem continues, the person is out until they figure out the problem. It's that simple.

In dungeons and pugs, I tend to be more gentle. I might tell the person that they mess up, but I genuinely try to help them figure the problem out. They usually end up thanking me for the advice.

To the question about friendships, i sort of answered that in another post too. I started playing the game just for fun. I ended up getting completely immersed in it when I started making friends. I have been to a guild retreat with the friends I have made. A bunch of us met up in Tennessee and went to the big aquarium, to a football game, and finished the weekend off with a big cookout. I went a little wary of finding a group of people that were socially defunct and emo. I found out that most of the people I played with were just as if not moreso normal than I am. Friendships are a defining theme in World of Warcraft. Without them I dont think the game would exist anymore. Who would play if everyone hated them and they hated everyone else?

[Moderator](#)
Hi Mike,

It sounds like you have a very different way of interacting with people depending on the situation then? i.e. raiding vs. most other times really. Any idea why that is? I'm getting the impression it's something to do with the reason why you're playing at any particular point in time.

Heh, sounds like you had a good time out there in Tennessee. Do you anticipate keeping in touch with these people once you stop playing WoW then, or transferring to another game as a group?

Has anyone else had experiences of this? i.e. developing friendships in game that mean something to you. I've met some Guild mates once and we had a great time, it was only a small group but we've known each other for years now.

[Mila](#)

I have met some great folks in games, and I still keep in touch with some that no longer play the same MMO as I do currently. I have had the opportunity to meet a few, and many are friends I already have in real life. I would love to meet all my guildies in person, but given the distances and the finances of many, I doubt that will happen anytime soon.

I don't generally say much to anyone in PUGs, even if I think they suck, but I WILL talk about them to my spouse, or guildies. :) I ignore idiots. If someone tells me how to play my toons better, I listen. I want to be good, afterall, and know that I am not the best by far, and have lots to learn still. For me, its more that I do not know many of the raids yet, since my guild does not yet raid- we still have many that are leveling. I likely could seek out some decdicated raiding guild to learn, but I prefer being with my guildies. I will eventually figure things out from the PUG raiding I do, and use this to teach the fights to my crew when they get there. I do try and help my guildies if I think there is something they should consider doing differently. I consider that part of being a guild leader. But my advice is often rather general, and I encourage people to seek information about their class from those who DO know.
And yes, its the in game friendships that keep me logging in. If everyone I know stops playing, then chances are so will I. MMOs are big lonely places without friends.

Moderator
As a foreramble (that really should be a word...heh), when people started researching the Internet, some argued that the quality of relationships was inferior to those you could make irl. Some people still argue this but generally research has shown that they aren't necessarily inferior to rl relationships and sometimes can be better.

So...do people see game friendships as being the same as real-life ones? I'll keep it that general, but you could think of it in terms of emotionality, closeness, openness, etc.

Mila, I also really liked your statement 'MMOs are big lonely places without friends.' It's ironic that for an environment that prides itself on providing the epic lootz, bigger and badder raids, etc that it's the social construct which keeps the game going - for many people at least.

Anyone got thoughts on that, or any for whom they don't really care too much abuot the social elements?

Mila
Meeting people online is similar to meeting folks irl. Some you hit it off with right away, some put you off right away, and most you can socialize with without making deep attachments. The difference as I see it is that in online environs its much harder to see the true person. Text alone can often convey impressions that can be overly favorable, or overly obnoxious. Usually the real deal is somewhere in between. One meets many many people on a near daily basis in both online and rl settings. Only a few do you ever become acquaintances with, fewer still friends, and very very few the best of friends. The quality of a friendship is always determined by the effort both parties put into it. To that extent, many of us gamers spend more time interacting with our online friends than those in real life, so of course you will get close to some of them. Not that we don't socialize with our rl friends, but often rl scheduling and work, and families don't allow for the same duration of interaction. Its the same reason many of us end up with good friends at our places of work, or school. I don't think online friendships are that different

than real ones, is what I am saying. Both have their ups and downs, usually not the same ones, so neither is better, just different.

Moderator
Yes, I see what you mean Mila re. the scheduling thing - the friendships aren't necessarily better or worse than RL ones, just that it's easier to access online gaming friends and thereby hang out. :)

Rowena
I agree with what Mila said about meeting people online and irl.

I started playing WoW as a game, with no conception of what it might mean in a social sense, but as I struggled through the learning curve of the first year or so I met a number of people who helped me, or that I helped in turn, and who are still online friends. They range in age from the 11-year-old (who I encouraged to NOT give out his age!) to people my own age and everything in between.

Even most of the ones who have stopped playing, or whose schedules changed so we aren't online together anymore, or who transferred servers, I have actually re-connected with here on FB.

I have been in a number of guilds, and there are always one or two people I meet that I keep up with when I move on. My current guild is the one I've been in the longest and feel most at home in, and these friendships are starting to move offline a little.

To answer your question about 'quality of relationships' I'll also share here an experience I had that was sheer high-school-level awkwardness. It was an emotional experience for me in that I really had my feelings hurt and had to think through the situation exactly the same as if it had been in person.

Around the time I hit 70 in BC, I was in a small guild that folded due to the GL's personal problems. There were six or seven of us who ran dungeons together regularly. One was a guy I had been introduced to by my very first online friends, and had been chatting with for most of the first 7 or 8 months I had been playing. He had an on-line (and rl?) girlfriend. Our group also included a married couple. When it became clear the guild was folding, he arranged for us all to join another guild.

Now, this guy was very sociable. There was nothing untoward in my relationship with the guy, although I also knew he was flirtatious with every female gamer he came in contact with. I just assumed it was his personality and didn't think anything of it. I am much more aware of online relationships now, but at that time, I was still trying to learn the game, and really hadn't put much thought beyond friendships into the social aspect.

The guild we joined, which like the old one generally had about 10-15 people on at any one time, was run by two couples, all co-GL's although it was mostly the two women who ran it. Over time--and it took several weeks for this all to play out, maybe 2 1/2 months in all--I became aware that I was being shut out socially.

The guy friend did chat with me (as did some of my other former guildmates), but I eventually got the sense that his gf was feeling a little threatened by this, even though I had thought we hit it off previously, and that the other women were deliberately making

me an outsider--it felt very primal in that sense. I also got the sense it was being orchestrated by one of the GL's.

When dungeon groups formed up, I was left out, even when I was responding to gchat calls--they would continue to ask for another person even if I offered to go. Even my general gchat was ignored, particularly by the other women, and the whole situation became very lonely and depressing for me. I was still learning how to navigate the whole guild/social thing at the time, and it very much felt like I was back in high school being left out of the 'cool kids' clique.

Because it was online and there were no physical cues to go by, the situation seemed to act out in slow motion. Once I figured out that the non-invites were deliberate, and that I was indeed being ignored by the other women, I felt very hurt, but then started thinking about the overall situation.

I realized that nothing I could say would make a difference--I was already on the outside, and not part of a couple. Also, I was hooked on the team aspect that tight-knit dungeon groups can have, and wanted to pursue that game as opposed to the questing/leveling. I had heard about raiding, and was interested in trying it. Clearly, I wasn't going to be given that opportunity in this guild.

So I started chatting to some of the other previous guildies who had gone to a different guild, (which is actually one of the top raiding guilds on our server) and based on their input I quit the one I was in, and joined my first raiding guild, where I was in a more diverse group of friends rather than couples, and began learning the whole raiding aspect of WoW. Even though I was a social member, there were still enough other non-raiders that we formed our own weekly Karazhan team.

I have to say it was a painful experience to go though at the time--I felt very lonely and isolated, and even cried a couple of times when it became clear the behavior was intentional--but in the end I moved into the kind of guild and gameplay I really enjoy.

I think if I had been interacting with these people face-to-face, it would have gone much more quickly. I would have seen the nonverbal cues that there was a problem, and it would have been easier to talk to people and work out what was really happening. The gf might have been able to tell that there was no intention on my part to interfere with her guy. I might still have removed myself from the situation, but conversely, I might have developed new friendships out of negativity, or at least left on a neutral basis.

In that way, I think online relationships are definitely trickier to handle. No nonverbal cues to go by. But the emotions certainly are real, and as an officer in my current guild I have to occasionally navigate relationship issues as well.

Rowena
Hmm sorry for the wall'o'text

Sarah
Rowenae I understand what you are saying. Having only text to go by is hard, emotes cannnot cover everything. Especially as a casual gamer I tend to be abit over-sensitive sometimes. Am I forcing myself ongroups who would be looking for a more experienced or skilled player? Do people take me along because they are nice guys or does my

performance seem OK to them (in raid/dungeon contexts). Sometimes in PUGs you get people who will call you names ('retarded' is a term I could kill every player for using, really). If criticism is fair and aimed to help you, I force myself to appreciate it (it is still criticism, do not tell me you like it ;-)) and I try to get better.

Generally as to social interaction, I like it when guild chat is lively. Some of the guildies were RL friends before, so this is a different dimension. Of course I discuss other players with husband and friends, like Mila (Oh - did we have a stupid PUG the other day... and so on). You also tend to react to characters in the guild (XY online - hey, gret to see you; Z online - oh gods, the spammer...) and it is funny to see the sublte signs in the guild that other do so too...

Hanna

The social aspect of gaming is important to me, but not at the start of the game. I typically play solo or with random pugs as I level--trying not to get too involved with anyone in particular until I am sure I am going to stick with the class I chose and sometimes even the game itself. Once I gain the levels I need in order to really make an impact with PvP, Dungeons, etc. then I begin searching out people I have noticed as being leaders and great at the game and try to find out more about their guild. I usually have two or three guilds that I run with regularly until I finally decide on one.

I personally have had two entire guilds of mine stop playing Warhammer, basically leaving me alone in the game. Although this sucks for the most part--my first guild I lost because leadership changed hands and many people were extremely unhappy about it so it dissolved, and the second guild, of which I was an officer, all left to play Aion. Both of these guild dissolutions happened right after a server transfer. So not only did I lose my guild both times, I was placed in a strange environment in which I had a high level toon...and knew very few people. Although this seems like it would be aggravating I actually thought it was a fantastic opportunity. It did not take long at all for me to be sought after by several high ranking guilds as my game talent and knowledge became ovbivious to the general population.

I never tell anyone that they have messed up, most people realize it as soon as it happens--if they are guildies I take it as people are human and we all make mistakes...if it is a pug I just shake it off and move on. Although I am one of the highest ranking healers in my game, it is not my place to tell anyone what to do. THey are there to have fun and if they do not take the game as seriously as I do, I just try to avoid grouping with them in the future (I am just quiet about it). I also take into consideration that it is JUST A GAME. As much as I love Warhammer I do not let it control me in any way. That seems silly to me.

As far as how I feel about these people, I like the people in my guild. I consider them my friends, but I do not think I would ever go out of my way to meet them in person. That would just be too weird for me. I know most of them are normal average family people just like I am...but being a married mother of 2 I just don't have the time or energy to put forth any effort other than the typed message or vent to someone living somewhere else. Heck, I dont even spend time with my RL friends!

As far as people who are jerks--chat trollers, whatever you want to call them. I just put

them on ignore and go on about my business. They are just trying to get a rise out of people and if people stop giving them what they want they will go away eventually. =)

[Christina](#)
friendships are big for me, but i find i have distinctions between what i call "wow friends" and "friends i met in wow"

my "wow friends" are those i chat with in game, sometimes raid with, etc. we get along because we have a common goal or interest (ie the game), but i can tell that without the game we probably wouldn't be friends due to substantially different personalities, maturity, life goals, etc etc. these are the people that if we go different directions in wow, we tend to not talk as much even if they remain on my "friends list".

my "friends i met in wow" are ones that i would be friends with regardless of wow. i may have friended them on fb or chat clients because of this and when we chat, it's often not about wow, but is about life in general. one example is a friend of mine i met a couple years ago who also became friends with my husband (who ironically doesn't even play wow, but they became friends b/c of mutual academic interests and blogs). we're actually hoping to visit him in the next year down in california! i'm no longer guilded with this guy, and we're at completely different places in our "wow-ing" (he's gearing up to do ICC, i'm working on hardmode LK)

I'm not sure what you meant about the second part of your question.... =/

[Moderator](#)
It sounds like social interaction or connections form an important part of game playing for most people, if not all. Sorry about your nasty situation Rowena, but I guess it's an indication that online interaction can be very similar to real world interaction and that people can make assumptions, etc.

I was also interested in what Sarah said about Guild dynamics, or awareness of who's come online and is about to start spamming, heh. I think there's such very complex social interaction going on in Guilds, as people shuffle places in the existing heirarchies and form small cliques of players.

As a follow on question, have most of you had to re-adjust how you interact (as a consequence of being online) or is it pretty much the same as RL?

Re. the second part of my question, I was thinking more about when you refer to someone else, but don't interact. I.e. Taking Sarah's example, there's classes and factions in WoW that I feel less well disposed to than others. Because I like undead characters I generally feel (without much reasoning I admit) that I'll probably get on with that player, whereas Blood elves I consider to be 'late comers to the party' and probably played by kids (again, without much reasoning, heh). when TBC originally came out that may have been the case, but now it's unlikely, but the social perceptions I have of those classes (not big on hunters), factions and races still exist.

[Sarah](#)
WEll, I guess it is alos much a matter of self-fulfillig prophecy. I tend to belive that most human pallys are played by twelve-year-olds. Usually their behavior fits the bill, but I

admit that if you expect a certain behavior, you will notice it more when it actually occurs...
And you really tend to wonder who plays male belf characters...
;-)

[Rowena](#)
Alex, for some reason it doesn't really matter to me what race or class someone else's toon is. I'm impartial as far as other people go. They'll stand or fall on their own merits for me. It's only when choosing my own toons that my preferences really come into play.

Sarah, I understand the self-fulfilling prophecy!

Oddly enough, I think the new LFD tool has changed my preconceptions about judging other players. I started out looking at gear scores (I have the ElitistGamer addon that shows people's gear, experience, etc.) and would quit if it looked like a 'fail' run, but eventually realized that you can't really go by that.

You could have a newbish player on a well-geared toon (first toon they ever leveled, or playiing someone else's account, or whatever), or conversely, have an experienced player leveling their umpteenth alt.

This weekend I had both: A PoS run, the ICC-geared tank couldn't control the mobs very well, but we managed with only one casualty; in HHOL, the tank had blue gear, average iLvl 187, yet was their third tank toon, knew the fights, knew the role, and held aggro very skillfully against ICC-geared heals and dps. If I had just looked at their gear and left, I would have missed a very nice, efficient run for my frost badges.

I find that now I'm doing solo LFD's even when guildies are asking to group up...I only leave now if the group truly is 'fail'--but I give them a chance to prove that. And for the most part I'm pleasantly surprised. The value for me is that I get exposed to other playstyles than the familiar ways of my guildies.

[Clare](#)
When i started playing WoW, we were a group of RL friends and made our own guild. New people joined the guild and we had a good time leveling. After 6 months many stopped playing and only some stayed. At that time we met Kevin and joined his guild. I love to be in that guild and found some people i call my friends. With those friends i talk about ingame stuff and RL things (like i do with my RL friends), group up and raid with them to have a fun evening. You can find friends in MMOs and the friendship can hold even when we would all stop playing. But like in RL there are people i pass by and say "omg, hopefully never again" and others i come along with.

[Gemma](#)
I'm an extremely shy person, so playing a MMO where you have to chat to people was a big step for me. I started playing WoW more for the leveling and the exploring - and I'm still a total Altoholic - but I've also begun enjoying PUGs and playing with my guild with my lvl 80. I'm even saying something in chat sometimes LOL

My guild leader is a friend from RL, which is probably the only reason why I joined a guild at all (that, and to stop the constant whispers if I wanted a guild), and I found that very helpful.

I've only started doing dungeons after Blizz established the Random Dungeon Finder because that allows me to find groups without having to actually talk to people. That is a godsend for people like me (and I'm sure there are more like me).

[Patrick](#)
I app'd to a new guild yesterday. This is the ONLY other time I've done that since I started this game over 3 years ago. Until now I've been guilded with RL friends. I always enjoyed having WoW as a way to keep in touch and socialize.

However, many of them have changed servers or just plain left the game. Lately I've been alone. My friends list isn't as active, and there haven't been many new people going on it... mostly as a result of the LFD system.

So it's just me... pugging away... flying around Northrend farming nodes.

So I app'd to another guild, hoping to restore that social aspect of WoW that I've always loved.

[Rowena](#)
I'm going start healing on my lvl 60 priest using the LFD tool...but sadly, it will probably be with people from other servers. I find it a blessing that you can get lower level dungeons by going cross-server, but a curse that you don't have the opportunity any more to build relationships with other people leveling on your own server...Outlands is pretty sparse these days, and Shattrath is a ghost town. =(

Good luck, Patrick

[Patrick](#)
App was accepted.

/takes a deep breath..

/gquit..

[Moderator](#)
How's it going with the new Guid Patrick?
:)

On the topic of other people, it sounds like the social element is really important for a lot of people - whether as a means of developing new friendships, or as a way of doing things differently to RL?

[Bethan](#)
The social aspect of this game is slightly important to me. Really when I am busy gathering, or questing, or doing dailies, or running heroics, I just don't want to be bothered. I have a small group of friends and a huge group of acquaintances. There is a group of 5 of us that have played together for almost 2 years now. As a matter of fact, we all server transferred together almost a year ago. The people I say hello to are greater in number than the people I hold actual conversations with, but those people that I consider my friends are very important to me. We have our own vent server (since we are

spread across 2 guilds) where we get together quite often. As a matter of fact even with 3 of us in 1 guild, we never use their vent server. I don't play this game to make friends, which means when I do make what I consider an actual friend they mean even more to me.

Moderator
Re. the making of actual friends, do you see them as different to your RL friends then - because of the differences in meeting up (so to speak) and getting to know them?

Bethan
I see the true friends I have made in WoW as just as important as my RL friends. My few true friends in WoW have my phone number and we text each other when we don't hear from each other after a few days, or if one of us is running late for a raid or whatnot. We also chat on vent for much longer and more often than I do to any of my RL friends on the phone. We have also discussed meeting but distance is a huge factor. I am just as close to my WoW friends as my RL friends.

Question 8 – Affordances

Moderator
Moving off character creation a bit (yay! ;)), I was wondering if people wanted to be able to do things in the game that they couldn't do. This relates to a concept called 'Affordances' - that any environment (real or otherwise) allows us to do certain things and not others, or a situation allows us to do some things, not others, etc.

So, I was wondering if people would like to be able to do things in the games that they can't. To start the ball rolling, I'd love to see a MMO where you could play an non-combat character - i.e. a tradesperson and there'd an entire game structure devoted to keep a shop going, i.e. success based on economics. You could have a character that went around chopping up stuff as well of course. :)

Rowena
Isn't that what Second Life is all about? Where people create their avatars, buy land, build things, start businesses, like the old SimCity game? Of course, in Second Life they encourage real-world monetary exchange, and there isn't a 'game' as such, just a virtual world to hang out in from what little I know. Not sure if that would fit your definition of an MMO.

I know I've seen suggestions on forums for the ability for players to create virtual houses and/or guild houses in WoW. Maybe that would make professions like 'woodworker' or 'builder' viable. But I'm not sure I'd want to play a character that couldn't also quest, raid, etc.

Sarah
Hmm - I would like to have a WoW where race does not select faction, so you can start whatever race you want up until, let's say level twenty, and then you have to decide which path to take. Would allow exploring a lot of different areas and races ;-)

Hanna

My husband played Star Wars Galaxies (before they ruined it he says ;) and they were able to build and furnish houses and kind of set up shop. I don't think I would like to JUST do that, I would get bored fairly fast--but that sort of thing would be a great aspect to any game especially if you had a lot of different choices as to what you wanted to do.

[Moderator](#)
Does the idea of doing something you already do irl have any appeal? I was thinking of going shopping for food or something, but there's variations of that already I guess - not quite the same though.
:)

[Christina](#)
hmm...customize your gear maybe? i'm not sure if i actually want this though. part of the appeal of tier gear and whatnot is status because everyone knows what it looks like.

maybe though the ability to choose colours so your gear can match better if you have slightly mismatch pieces? haha....

i'm stretching here...not really something i've overly thought about.

OH WAIT

i got one.

if you have 310% mount speed it should retroactively put that on your other mounts (like some mounts already do...but this should be all, IMO)

[Moderator](#)
Heh, 310% mount speed would be pretty useful everywhere.

Unless they've changed it, on Warhammer you can dye your equipment different colours. There's still the ability to identify broadly where players are in the game (and so establish social ranking) through the gear, but there's much more individuality.

[Hanna](#)
Nopw, they havent changed it--you can still dye everything ;)

[Patrick](#)
I'm not to overly interested in creating things.

Maybe if there were more in-game events like the taking of IQD. That was sweet! The pre-LK event and TBC were fun too. You really felt as though you were part of lore... YOUR actions effected the world as a whole.

[Moderator](#)
How about things like achievements, completing professions, getting all the recipes, etc - does that figure highly in anyone's game play?

and any idea why, if that's the case?
:)

[Patrick](#)
Achievement would be the only thing I would say applies here. Not all of the achievements mind, but the ones that add up to something else (World Event, Explorer, quests, etc).

I really couldn't be arsed to kill turkeys in Howling Fjord

[Bethan](#)
I can't really think of much, since, as I have said in most of my replies, WoW was my first MMO. I know my husband played Everquest so there are things in WoW he can't do that he was able to do in Everquest that he mentions from time to time he wishes he could do here. Since WoW is the only MMO I have ever know, the world and it's limitations are exactly what they should be, I don't know any differently from other games.

Question 9 – Losing a Character

[Moderator](#)
Referencing some comments that people have made about feeling like they'd messed about with their characters a bit (specifically in the horror of the barbers shop), I wanted to see how people would feel about losing a character - i.e. having it deleted, whether some characters would be ok to lose and others more traumatic, why, etc.

Again, to start the ball rolling, I'd be fine with my mage being deleted and my bank alt (after I'd got the money out of him, heh). My shaman and warlock I'd be irked about, but not overly upset. My druid I'd be quite upset about because I've always seen him as representing my 'bouncy' side (kitty form FTW!) but losing my priest would be the worst - for a variety of reasons, some referencing RL (i.e. my attachment to him and what I see as his personality) and others the game (having seen a lot of the game world with him and raiding for a while).

[Sarah](#)
Hmmm - exploring the worlds and doing the quests is a main motivation for me, and nobody can take that away. What I would hate most is to lose all the effort that has gone into equiping the character, again, especially the main. I think I could handle losing characters up to about level 40 - they are not completely solid to me yet at that stage. But once you have gotten to 80, so much time and dedication have flown into the character that it would be hard to lose

[Moderator](#)
So in a way it would be more because of the time and effort you've put in, rather than losing something intrinsically valuable to 'you'?

[Christina](#)
ugh..i don't want to think about it D=

♥ my characters

ya...some <30 alt meh....but ones i've grown attached too, back off =P

Kevin
Having my character deleted would be a massive inconvenience, since I'd have to re-level and re-gear him. I wouldn't really see it as a loss though, since I'd be able to get him back to his old self eventually, except for some achievements and items that I wouldn't lose any sleep over. It would actually give me a reason to play more, since right now I consider the game "completed" apart from the final few raid bosses, so I only log in to do those.

The only way he could really be killed is if the race/class is removed from the game, or the game dies and they turn off the servers. Both of those would be painful. I'm hoping I lose interest in WoW before that happens.

Moderator
Heh, sorry to cause such troublesome thoughts Christina - why does it cause aggrevation though? :)

Kevin - I'm a bit confused re. your post, if having your character deleted would be a massive inconvenience (but not much more), why would have the class deleted be painful?

Kevin
Because right now, I could replicate the original character exactly. If that option was removed, that would be bad.

Moderator
So, if I get you then, it's not the loss of character that would be irksome, but the loss of the ability to have a character that would be disturbing. I.e. the loss of being able to have some virtual presence (on whatever character you happened to choose, in this case your most developed character).

Christina
i just don't like the thought of the hassle to get them back - because be assured i would try to get them back. and if i couldn't get them back...i think that would cause me to take a break from wow...at least for a bit. 4 years invested into characters is not something i want to see taken away from me

Kevin
As far as I'm concerned, the only difference between a max-level character that's five years old, and one that's five weeks old, is that the five year old character has a bank full of obsolete junk. All the good memories I have from WoW are stored inside my head, the character knows nothing. (You could argue that achievements are a way for a character to "remember" past deeds. Personally I'm not bothered about achievements.)

If I had a cute little puppy and it got hit by a bus, I could buy an identical puppy and anyone who didn't know the original puppy was dead probably wouldn't know the difference. But since puppies are alive and have memories and emotions I wouldn't be

able to kid myself that the original puppy lived on in this new one. Even if the puppy was a perfect clone that I somehow created one second before the original one was hit by the bus, I would know that the original puppy no longer existed, and I would mourn it.

A WoW character is a digital construct made from a limited set of rudimentary building blocks. It's trivial to make a new one, identical to the old one, and apart from the loss of some obsolete gear and some rare mounts, it would be the same character to me. He only comes alive when injected with my personality and imagination, and his only memories are my memories. Those things are safe from deletion.

You don't need to worry about the hassle of getting a character back. I know loads of people who, when quitting WoW "forever", have deleted their characters so they can't come back and play again. When they inevitably come back they get their deleted characters restored the same day. For this question I'm assuming that "deleted" actually means "permanently deleted" even though I know that will never happen while the game still exists.

[Moderator](#)
Ok, so for you Kevin, a character is merely a place holder for the memories that you have for that character and on that basis it's easy to replicate them - since they don't have any personality beyond your own (or any deviation from your own).

How does that work for other people? Do you feel that some of your characters have their own identity?

To create a hypothetical scenario on the same lines, if you gave your account to someone and they started playing your favourite character in a totally different way (even if that was just based on their personality), would that character still be...that character?

[Kevin](#)
I'm not saying the character's personality doesn't deviate from my own. I have never set fire to an orphan, not even accidentally. I have created a personality for my character and it is important to me, but it doesn't exist anywhere outside my head. The character can't be deleted from WoW as long as the means to create an identical avatar for it still exists.

[Christina](#)
It still seems like a hassle though. My friend got hacked and it took about a week for his account to get fully restored. Because of that he couldn't raid that week, and this was during "the race to the LK"

And sure, you're right about the bank full of obsolete crap (my bank is hilarious for stuff like that), but there are also things that you just can't get anymore that i have on my main (ie. amani war bear, old pvp title). Perhaps I'm sentimental, but rerolling the same character doesn't feel the same.

[Moderator](#)
Ok, well that's interesting then - for both of you your mains obviously have significance, but there appears to be differing views on the permanence or ability to replicate them.

I'm guessing that this difference must lie in the way that you relate to the characters, i.e. what they mean to you.

We're all just playing with dolls, really. And not unique, hand-stitched antique dolls that can never be replaced. We're using Barbies.

i hated barbies. i was very particular about my polly pockets though. =P

but ya, it seems apparent we have differing levels of emotional attachment to our characters =P

I would hate to loose my Warhammer Zealot. I would have no problem remaking her avatar as someone else mentioned, but I can never get back the hours and hours I have spend leveling her PvP rank and obtaining hard to get gear. If she was deleted I would be so ticked off that I can't say I would ever play another MMO. Thats how much I feel I have put into her. With grad school, my husband and kids, work....I have a very limited time each week to play--getting back all that hard work is not an option. I would rather just never play again ;)

I think I may have touched on this earlier but I can't seem to find it anyway, just something that came up in one of the synchronous focus groups.

If you gave your account to someone else and they played your characters, would they still be that character? or, as a variation, if they played the character in a totally different way - would they still be 'X', X obviously being whatever character you wish to debate this point about. :)

For my two cents, if someone else played my characters I'd feel as if someone was a. messing about with part of me, and b. playing about a unique entity and forcing something onto my chars, i'd feel quite angry, heh.

I have a guild mate that has nothing but free time and knows the TOVL dungeon like the back of his hand. I trust him (as much as you can trust someone you have never met in person ;) so I have allowed him to take my zealot through with his group for me, he said he wanted to help me get the rest of my gear since I dont have the time during the week to commit to a raid anymore. He has obtained almost every piece of gear that I still needed along with three of my four glyphs (3 as of right now, hes still working on it for me). I had a long conversation with him before he started playing her--about how he was NOT to make jokes, argue with anyone, or flirt--basically I didnt want him RPing her. I had no control over what he would say, so I just told him not to do it at all. lol. So far things are going very well, he doesn't bother my stuff--he logs her in, does TOVL and then logs back onto his own toon. Everyone in our guild and alliance knows if I show up as being in TOVL that its him--not me. I really appreciate what he is doing for me, and whatever loot he gets that fits other classes I salvage to make high level talismans for him.
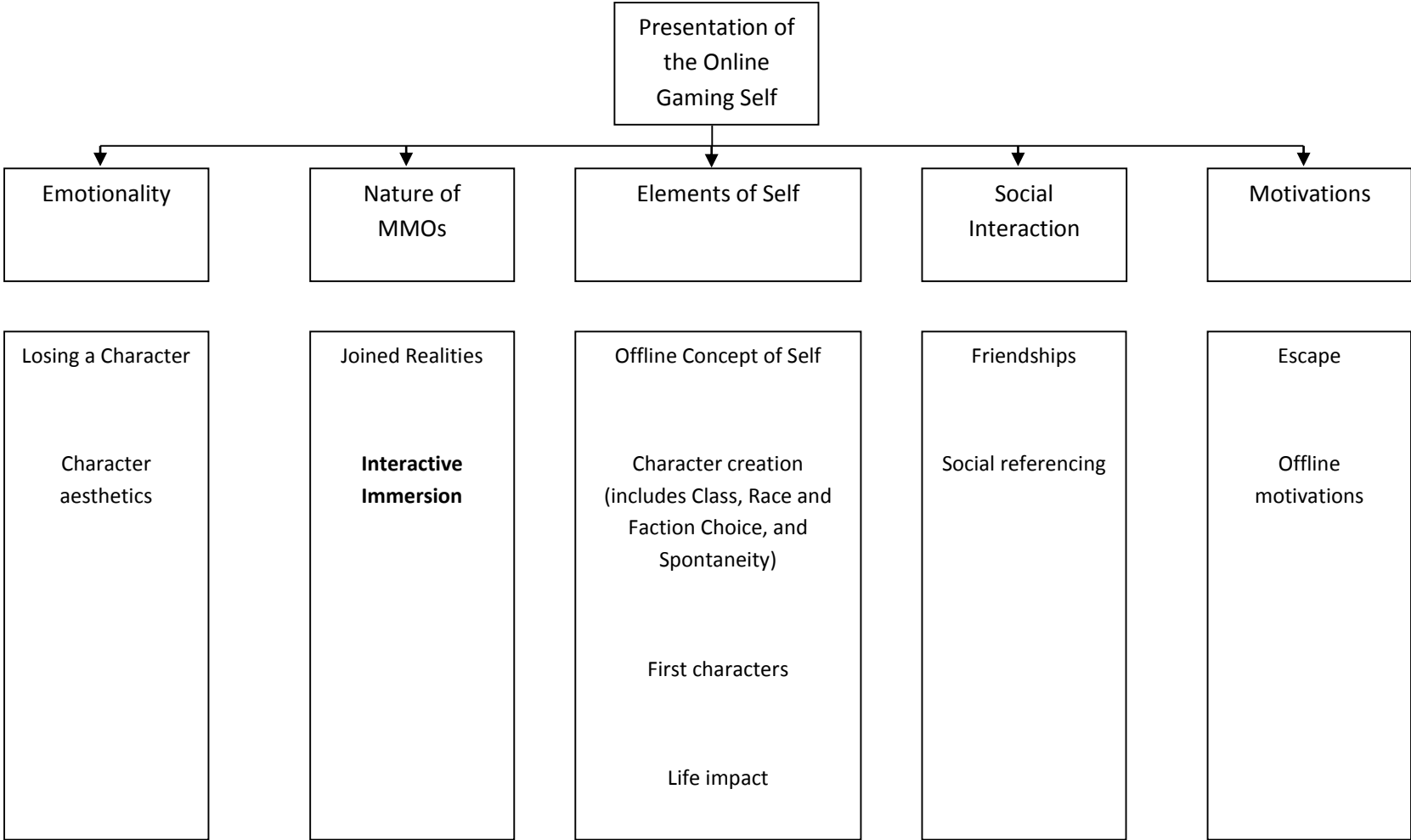
Losing either of my two 80's would be devastating for me. My main mage moreso than my alt shammy. My main represents my discovery of WoW, as well as my very first looks at different things and places in the game. Not to mention the time invested in her. She has more than 100 mounts, more than 100 pets, tons of rare chanting and tailoring recipes, great gear and over 8500 achievement points. Losing her would probably make me lose all of my interest in the game, as SHE is my focus in WoW.

As for letting anyone else play her, the only person I have ever let play my toons is my husband. He enjoys pvp, which I am not a fan of, and he enjoys her bursty dps in bg's. I also use his toon to go herbing or mining, but other than that, there is not a single person I would ever let play my toons. Even my best friend of almost 10 years who also plays WoW, I wouldn't even consider letting her, or anyone else, play on my toons.

I have a 62 paladin, and a 75 priest, (both created within the last 2 months) and I don't think I would mind losing either of them too much, it would be sad but I wouldn't be crushed. There isn't nearly as much time invested in them because you can level a toon from 1-80 in less than 10 days playtime.

Appendix X: Full Theoretical Model

```
                        ┌─────────────────┐
                        │ Presentation of │
                        │   the Online    │
                        │  Gaming Self    │
                        └─────────────────┘
```

Emotionality	Nature of MMOs	Elements of Self	Social Interaction	Motivations
Losing a Character	Joined Realities	Offline Concept of Self	Friendships	Escape
Character aesthetics	**Interactive Immersion**	Character creation (includes Class, Race and Faction Choice, and Spontaneity)	Social referencing	Offline motivations
		First characters		
		Life impact		

Appendix XI: Online Locations for Advertising Study Three

- http://www.zam.com/forum.html

- http://global.4story.com/freegameforum/default.asp

- http://www.alganon.com/forums/

- http://forums.pixelminegames.com/index.php?showforum=24

- http://en.alaplaya.net/forum/

- http://boi-forum.perfectworld.com/

- http://www.perfectworld.com/community

- http://boi-forum.perfectworld.com/forumdisplay.php?f=72

- http://cronous.neofun.com/

- http://dekaron.gamehi.com/

- http://en.dragonica.gpotato.eu/

- http://en.forum.gpotato.euhttp://forum.dragonraja.eu/

- http://www.eq2flames.com/

- http://outspark.com/forums/forumdisplay.php?f=9

- http://en.alaplaya.net/forum/florensia-forums-f2484/

- http://board.gatesofandaron.com/index.php?page=Index

- http://hwp-alpha-ext.godsandheroes.com/jive/forum.jspa?forumID=83

- http://hero.netgame.com/community/forum/

- http://www.onrpg.com/boards/

- http://iris-forum.gpotato.com/

- http://www.karosgame.com/forum/home.nhn

- http://www.aeriagames.com/forums/

- http://forums.lotro.com/

- http://mwo.enjoymmo.com/forum/

- http://www.mortalonline.com/forums/

- http://www.muhq.com/forums/forums.html

- http://www.atlusonline.com/forums/index.php

- http://www.orderandchaos.info/

- http://www.spacetimestudios.com/forum.php

- http://prius-forum.gpotato.com/

- http://www.rakion.org/forums/

- http://rappelz-forum.gpotato.com/

- http://nforum.ogplanet.com/redstone/

- http://forums.riftgame.com/rift-general-discussions

- http://www.aeriagames.com/forums/en/index.php?f=140

- http://shoonline.neofun.com/web/forum/list_category.asp

- http://www.ijji.com/

- http://www.talismanonline.com/

- http://forum.ntreev.net/trickster/forums/

- http://www.uoforums.com/off-topic-general-discussion

- http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/ (Gaming forum)

- http://eu.battle.net/wow/en/forum/ (General forum)

Facebook Groups:

- Addicted to World of Warcraft

- Warhammer Online

- I'm a girl and I play WoW

Appendix XII: Statements posted at online locations for advertising Study Three

Statement 1, posted on forums for games with a subscription fee.

Hi all,

This is an invitation to take part in Psychological research into MMOs. It's a questionnaire looking at identity in MMOs and how people express themselves in such environments. There's 79 questions in total which shouldn't take too long to complete – plus if you wish you'll be entered into a prize draw in which you can win a year's worth of game time (up to a set value)! In addition, there's four smaller prizes of 3 months of game time. Alternatively you can win an equal amount in vouchers from Amazon (or an online shop of your choice.) To take part in the research, please follow the link below:

http://www.kwiksurveys.com?s=NLIKFI_2a631bd6

Please feel free to forward the link on to any gamers who you think might want to take part in the research. If you have any questions that you'd like answered before taking in the research, please feel free to send me a private message and I'll answer any questions that you might have.

To tell you about myself a bit, I'm a gamer of many years standing (30 years and counting) and have played many different MMOs in my time. Apart from the fact they're great fun, I think they represent an evolution of sorts in terms of how people interact, representative as they are of virtual environments in general. That's a pretty short description of my thoughts and opinions about MMOs in general, but if people want to engage in discussion of that nature I'm quite willing to take part.

Thanks,

Alex Meredith,
Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University

http://www.ntu.ac.uk/research/groups_centres/soc/cyberpsychology.html

http://nottinghamtrent.academia.edu/AlexMeredith

Appendix XIII: Structure of Study Three Questionnaire

The reader is advised that for the purpose of this thesis, all answer radio buttons within the questionnaire have been removed for formatting reasons. The majority of the questions followed a Likert scale format and aside from one reminder set of potential answers at the top of each questionnaire page, the remainder have been removed. For those questions not in this format, the answer are still returned, though without their appropriate radio buttons. In addition, all text boxes where participants were asked to provide a unique identifier or an email address (for example) have also been removed.

Construction of Self in Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs)

Introduction Page

About the study…

This study is looking at if and how you express your identity in Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) such as World of Warcraft, Warhammer, Age of Conan, etc. This might be through character creation, how you play your characters, whether looks are important and how much you refer to other people, for example.

About the research...

This is the third and final study in a piece of research looking at identity in Massively Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) - the first involved one on one interviews, and the second online focus groups. This third study will use the results of those studies and see if they can be generalised to a bigger, broader population. The study involves sixty eight questions about your gaming habits, plus an additional eleven about your age, sex and other demographic information although this will include game related questions too. In all, the study should take approximately fifteen minutes to complete.

Instructions

The questions will involve a statement such as 'Friendships that I've made through MMOs are very important to me'. For these statement you are asked to mark on a scale how much you agree with them – from strongly agree to strongly disagree. There may be some questions which are not applicable to you (for example on the topic of Gender Swapping) and there will an option available for that too. The demographic questions do not use such a system but merely requires the appropriate answer.

Finally, please read the questions carefully. Some questions may appear to be asking the same thing, but in fact are trying to explore very *specific* elements of your expression of self.

Anonymity, confidentiality, data security and right to withdraw data

For the purposes of this study, it is not necessary to know your name or address – as such your results will be entirely anonymous. Your individual results will be used in the data analysis however and will be known to the research team, but to no-one else. In addition, if you wish to withdraw your data this is entirely acceptable and you are not required to give any reason for wishing to do so - this can be done at any time.

On the next page you will be asked to give a unique identifier (which you will provide), so that your results can be identified should you wish to remove them from the study. Finally, your data will be kept on a secure computer and the results destroyed within 3 years of the research being completed. This is in accordance with Data Security Requirements of both the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the American Psychological Association (APA).

Prize Draw

For taking part in this research, you will be invited to take part in a prize draw in which you can win £100 of vouchers, or a year's worth of game time for the game of your choice. In addition, there are 4 additional prizes of £25 (game time or vouchers).

*Consent

Having read what the research is about and what is required of you, do you agree to take part?

      Yes / No

Thank you for agreeing to take part in the research.

In the event that you wish to remove your data from the study, it is necessary that you have a unique identifier. This will allow the researchers to identify your data and so remove it from the data set. In the box below please write your unique identifier - this can be any combination of letters and / or numbers.

*Please type in your chosen unique identifier.

Questionnaire Start Page

The questionnaire is broken into various sections and, as indicated earlier, you will be presented with a statement and asked to indicate how much you agree or disagree with it.

When you feel ready, please click the 'Next' link below to start the questionnaire.

Page 1

*If a character of mine were permanently deleted I would be deeply upset.

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree

*Things that happen in the game can often have a strong emotional effect on me in real life.

*The feeling of being immersed and interacting in the game world is important to me.

*When creating a character, it is important to me that he / she reflects some element (emotional, intellectual, spiritual, etc) of 'me'.

*My first '*proper*' character contains many elements of what I see as 'myself'.

*With at least one of my characters, when I created him / her it was important that he / she looked like me as much as possible.

*I have deliberately added traits and personality elements to my gaming characters, which I don't have in real life.

*I think that the way I present myself in the game is a reflection of my real life identity.

*The opportunity to play my MMO and get away from real life for a bit is very important to me.

*I have at least one character which is the opposite gender to my real life gender (gender swapping).

Yes / No

Gender Swapping Questions

*I *specifically* decided to create a character of the opposite sex to my real life gender.

Yes / No

*Playing a character in a MMO that is the opposite to my real life sex gives me an opportunity to express aspects of myself that don't normally get a chance to be shown in real life.

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree

Page Two

*Having a character permanently deleted is one of the most upsetting events that could occur in my game.

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree

*Often other players influence how I feel whilst I'm playing.

*I like MMOs because I can feel really immersed in the game world.

*When creating a character, I like them to reflect some of my real life beliefs and attitudes.

*My first '*proper*' character is / was very important to me.

*I would say that playing MMOs has had a significant impact upon my life, in terms of how I see myself.

*Friendships that I've made through playing MMOs are very important to me.

*It is not important to me whether my character(s) represent me or not, the only reason I play is to have fun.

*I have actively hidden aspects of my real life personality, so they are not shown in my game character(s).

Page Three

*If a character of mine were permanently deleted I'd feel as if I'd lost the ability to represent an aspect of myself in the game.

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree

*If I feel that I'm getting on with the players I'm gaming with, I feel happier in real life.

*To me, some of my characters exist independently of me, as if they have become their own entities in the game.

*When creating a character, their race is important to me as a means of expressing some aspect of my real world identity.

*I identity with my character(s), purely on the basis of how much I have played him / her / them. Beyond that, they do not mean anything special to me.

*I would say that playing MMOs has allowed me to learn more about myself.

*MMOs allow me to act out parts of myself better than I can do in the real world.

*Online friendships have had an impact on my real world life.

*I feel that my real world past has influenced my gaming to some extent, in character creation, how I play a character, etc.

Page Four

*Permanently losing a character would be like losing a part of myself.

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree

*I feel that it's important that I act respectfully in the game, as it's a reflection of me as a person.

*I don't feel that my characters have any existence beyond my own.

*When creating a character, their class is important to me as a means of expressing some aspect of my real world identity.

*I have to play my characters a while before I feel attached to them.

*MMOs have largely had a positive effect on my real life.

*The chance to express different aspects of myself though a game character(s) is very important to me.

*The fact that MMOs are social environments where I can interact with other people is very important to me.

*Sometimes I fantasize about having MMO powers in the real world.

Page Five

*The way my character looks in the game is very important to me.

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree

*MMOs are virtual environments, so it makes no difference if I act morally or not in the game.

*If I even think about changing an aspect of my character (i.e. his/her looks, the way I play them in the game, etc) I feel guilty for doing so.

*When creating a character, their Faction is important to me as a means of expressing some aspect of my real world identity.

*I started playing a character as if it had a different personality to mine, but as time has gone on, the character has become more like me.

*One reason I have multiple characters is because this enables me to explore different sides of my real world personality.

*If I engage in role play, I use it as a means of expressing different sides of my real world self - whether they are hidden aspects or those that I frequently show.

*Apart from friends and Guild members, I don't socialise that much with other players.

*On the whole, I don't fantasize about the game when I'm not playing it.

Page Six

*If I get a piece of equipment that doesn't look good on my character, I'll consider not using it.

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree

*I see the game world as being no different from the real world.

*If I've changed how a character looks in the past or how they act, I've felt extremely guilty for doing so.

*When creating characters, I don't really think about their looks, what they say about me, etc.

*When I started gaming I invented a separate identity for my character(s), but over time they've become more like my real world character.

*I have multiple characters because they enable me to experience different aspects of the game.

*The ability to role play a character in a MMO is very important to me.

*When in game, I think about what I'm saying and doing and how other players might react.

*Gaming has played an important part in my life for many years.

Page Seven

*I am often emotionally affected by what happens in the game.

Strongly Disagree / Disagree / Neutral / Agree / Strongly Agree

*The game world is completely separate from the real world.

*When I create a character, the way they look is important to me.

*When I create a character, I think a lot about what they'll say about me as a player.

*In the past when creating a character, I wanted him / her to resemble me – either physically or mentally.

*I feel that at least one of my characters can represent the 'real' me.

*When playing an MMO, I like people to know what I've achieved or done in the game.

*Sometimes I play just to escape the pressures of real life, even if only for a little while.

*For many years now I've thought of myself as a 'gamer'.

Demographics

The purpose of this page is just to get a bit of information about you, and your gaming habits.

*What is your sex?

> **Male / Female**

*What is your age?

*What is your highest educational qualification?

O Levels / GCSE's refer to stopping education at 16, A Levels to 18 years old.

> **No qualifications**
>
> **O levels / GCSE's, or equivalent qualification**
>
> **A levels, or equivalent qualification**
>
> **Degree, or equivalent qualification**
>
> **Masters / PhD**

*Please indicate your employment status, as indicated by your activity in this area over the last two weeks:

> **Employer**
>
> **Employed (Full or Part time)**
>
> **On a government sponsored training scheme**
>
> **Self-employed or freelance**
>
> **Away from work ill, on maternity / paternity leave, or temporarily laid off**

Student

Not working

If you consider yourself to be employed, please indicate the nature of your work in the box below.

*At what age did you start playing computer / console games?

*In your chosen MMO, what is the primary server type you play on?

    RP PvP (Role play Person vs. Person)

    RP (Role play)

    Normal

    PvP (Person vs. Person)

*What MMOs have you played? If you've played one that isn't mentioned, please feel free to include it in the comment box below the question.

Age of Conan	**Aion**
City of Heroes / City of Villains	**Dark Age of Camelot**
Eve Online	**Everquest**
Everquest 2	**Final Fantasy XI**
Guild wars	**Lord of the Rings Online**
Rift	**Runescale**
Runescape	**Warhammer Online**
World of Warcraft	**Other (please specify)**

*How many hours a week do you play your chosen MMO?

0 − 5	**5 − 10**	**10 − 15**
15 − 20	**20 − 25**	**25 − 30**
30 − 35	**35 − 40**	**40+**

*For the following scales, please rate their importance in your MMO gaming.

In the scales, 1 is 'Of no importance' and 10 is 'Highly important'.

Social Interaction

Role playing

Expressing your real 'self' within the game

Seeing end-game content

Fighting other players (PvP)

Completing item sets, achievements, tome unlocks, etc

To say thank you for taking part in this research, we would like to invite you to take part in a prize draw.

The first prize is £100 of Amazon vouchers (or an equivalent amount of paid for game time for the game of your choice), and there will be a four additional prizes worth £25 (Amazon vouchers or paid for game time).

If you wish to take part in this prize draw, please enter a contact email address in the box below. Please be assured that this email address will not be given to any third parties and will be remain entirely secure. Please also ensure that this email address is active, as prizes not claimed after 6 months will be redrawn and another winner found. Finally, if you have found this research interesting and would be interested in taking part in more research in the future, please enter a contact email address in the box below. Again, please be assured that this will not be forward on to any third parties, and that you would only be contacted by the researchers with an invitation to take part in game related research.

Debrief Page

Thank you for taking part in this questionnaire. It is hoped that by looking at how people express their identity in virtual environments (such as MMOs) we can understand how people use the Internet, online games, etc in their daily lives.

If you have any questions about the research, have some comments to make or would like to see the final results, please feel free to contact me on Alexander.meredith@ntu.ac.uk.

If any of the questions have upset you and you'd like to talk to someone independent of the

research team about the issues that have been raised, Sane (in the UK) can be contacted on 0845 767 8000 and the American Counselling Association (in the US) can be contacted on 800 347 6647. For other countries, please see your appropriate directory enquiries for mental health help lines.

Once again, thank you for taking part in this research.

End of Questionnaire.

Thank you for your time and goodbye.

Appendix XIV: Concept Inclusion / Exclusion categories for Study Three

- To be included in the third study:

  - Emotionality
    - Losing a Character
    - Moral consequences
    - Gaming Aesthetics
    - Offline emotionality and mood (Merger of Offline emotionality and mood)
  - Nature of MMOs
    - Character as entity
      - Presence
      - Character infringement
    - Interactive immersion
    - Online-offline properties (Merger of Online / Offline differences & Joined Realities

  - Elements of self
    - Character creation
      - Class choice
      - Faction choice
      - Race choice
      - First character
    - Gender swapping
    - Time invested
    - Replication (Merger of Avatar as self & Replication)
    - Identity re-assertion
    - Life impact
    - Multiple characters
    - Offline concept of self

- ▪ Role play
  - o Social Interaction
    - ▪ Desire for Recognition
    - ▪ Friendships
    - ▪ Social referencing (Merger of Audience & Social Referencing)
  - o Motivations
    - ▪ Escape
    - ▪ Offline motivations (Merger of Offline past & offline gaming motivations)

- To be included in the third study, should there be sufficient space. Given the constraints of the thesis in terms of space, none of the these concepts were included in the final questionnaire:

  - o Arguments
  - o Being hidden
  - o Character identification and timelines
  - o Duplicity
  - o Experimentation
  - o Gaming history
  - o Identification development
  - o Familiarity
  - o Joined realities
  - o Offline world reference

- To be merged with another concept due to their overlapping nature:

  - o Audience & Social Referencing
  - o Avatar as self & Replication
  - o Mood & Offline emotionality
  - o Offline past & Offline gaming motivations
  - o Online / Offline differences & Joined Realities

- To be left out of the third study due to a lack of sufficient material to justify their inclusion:

  - Character nostalgia
  - Character relationships
  - Discrepancy
  - Online gaming motivations
  - Self-awareness
  - Server choice
  - Usage

Appendix XV: Pre-Test Feedback for Study Three

<u>**Pre-test Person A**</u>

1.	MMOs feel different to me….*compared to what?*
2.	Feedback re. format – 3rd format: more important forms, quicker, can gauge changes but maybe would influence answers. 2nd format: waste of space. 1st: maybe take more time.
3.	Duplication of questions
4.	It isn't important – *it is not important*
5.	I have actively hidden aspects – typo
6.	Having a character permanently deleted…insert word 'thing'?
7.	I would say that playing…*about who I am.*
8.	When creating a character, I like them…*word 'Interests' means hobbies, misleading – beliefs?*
9.	When creating a character – clear to gamers?
10.	If a character of mine were…*typo, 'to permanently'*
11.	I feel that it's important – typo, 'act' respectfully.
12.	The fact that MMOs are social environments – *sounds a bit detached, does that refers to MMO environments being social generally, or the fact that the player can socialise.*
13.	If I fantasize about the game – *doesn't make any sense!*
14.	If I engage in role play – *clarify re. expressing parts that wouldn't normally express?*
15.	How you act in the game – *what does that refer to?*
16.	In the past I've substantially – *changed to altered?*
17.	Page 6: The ability to role play – *my character, or in general?*

<u>**Pre-test Person B**</u>

1.	I think that my actions in the game – make sure that participants don't think it's about what can be done (i.e. shoot lightning bolts) but more about identity.
2.	The possibility of playing a character – too long, shorten.
3.	I deliberately created – *maybe I specifically wanted / I decided to advance*
4.	I would say that playing a MMOs has had – *specify in terms of identity exploration, not purely time spent, etc*
5.	Formatting: Spread across page not as good as vertical stack.
6.	In multiple spread, can select all of the options.
7.	Formatting: Prefer 1 as take more time.
8.	MMOs feel different to me – *different to what? Other games, real world?*
9.	Page 3: MMOs allow me – *English is clunky; 'act out more fully'?*

10. When creating a character, their race/faction/class – *remove 'at least'*.
11. If a character of mine – *aspect instead of part*.
12. Page 4: *Sometimes I fantasise about having MMO powers…*
13. The chance to express…character(s)
14. Page 5: Remove 'after character creation' in the 'The way my character looks…'
15. Faction questions – remove bit in brackets
16. If I engage in role play – *commonly used parts or parts that don't get much air time, repressed parts?*
17. If I fantasise about the game – *visual self, identity, what?*
18. *Different sides instead of different parts*
19. In the past I've substantially changed – *when, maybe include 'mid-game', no reference to feeling guilty?*
20. In the past… - *maybe have two different questions, separating looks and acts?*
21. Apart from friends and Guild members, *I don't socialise that much with other players?*
22. How you act in the game – *make sure they know I'm talking out social relationships, not pure action based interaction.*
23. Page 6: When creating characters – *remove 'at all'*.
24. Gaming has played an important part – *gaming or MMO gaming.*
25. I have multiple characters.
26. If I get a piece of gear – *equipment not gear?*
27. When I create a character – *maybe 'a lot of time designing?', clarify what I'm spending time on.*
28. Demographics – remove randomisation of questions.
29. *Maybe remove PvE content?*
30. Need 0 – 10 on scales?

Appendix XVI: Study 3 Concept Statements

- Emotionality

  - Losing a character:
    - **Emotional Impact 1**: *If a character of mine were permanently deleted I would be deeply upset.* **(EMOIMP_1)**
    - **Emotional Impact 2**: *Having a character permanently deleted is one of the most upsetting things that could occur in my game.* **(EMOIMP_2)**
    - **Loss of self 1**: *If a character of mine were permanently deleted I'd feel as if I'd lost the ability to represent an aspect of myself in the game.* **(LOSSELF_1)**
    - **Loss of self 2**: *Permanently losing a character would be like losing part of myself.* **LOSSELF_2)**
  - Gaming aesthetics:
    - Importance of looks 1: *The way my character looks in the game is very important to me.* **(IMPLOO_1)**
    - Importance of looks 2: *If I get a piece of gear that doesn't look good on my character, I'll consider not using it.* **(IMPLOO_2)**
  - Offline emotions and mood:
    - **Offline impact 1**: *I am often emotionally affected by what happens in the game.* **(OFFIMP_1)**
    - **Offline impact 2**: *Things that happen in the game can often have a strong emotional effect on me in real life.* **(OFFIMP_2)**
    - **Emotional Impact 1**: *Often other players can influence how I feel whilst I'm playing.* **(SOCEMO_1)**
    - **Emotional Impact 2**: *If I feel that I'm getting on with the players I'm gaming with, I feel happier in real life.* **(SOCEMO_2)**
  - Moral Consequences:
    - **Moral Consequences 1**: *I feel it's important that I act respectfully in the game, as it's a reflection of me as a person.* **(MORCON_1)**
    - **Moral Consequences 2**: *MMOs are virtual environments, so it makes no difference if I act morally or not in the game.* **(Reverse Scoring) (MORCON_2)**

- Nature of MMOs

  - Online – Offline Properties:
    - Differences 1: *I see the game world as being no different from the real world.* **(DIFF_1)**
    - Differences 2: *The game world is completely separate from the real world.* **(Reverse Scoring) (DIFF_2)**
  - Interactive Immersion:
    - Importance of Immersion 1: *The feeling of being immersed and interacting in the game world is important to me.* **(IMPIMM_1)**

- Importance of Immersion 2: *I like MMOs because I can feel really immersed in the game world.* **(IMPIMM_2)**
    - o Character as Entity:
        - Presence:
            - Presence 1: *To me, some of my characters exist independent of me, as if they've become their own entities in the game.* **(PRES_1)**
            - Presence 2: *I don't feel that my characters have any existence beyond my own.* (Reverse Scoring) **(PRES_2)**
        - Character infringement:
            - Character infringement 1: *If I even think about changing an aspect of my character (i.e. his/her looks, the way I play in the game, etc) I feel guilty for doing so.* **(CHAINF_1)**
            - Character infringement 2: *If I've changed how a character looks in the past or how they act, I've felt extremely guilty for doing so.* **(CHAINF_2)**

- Elements of Self

    - o Character creation:
        - Character creation 1: *When I create a character, the way they look is important to me.* **(CHACRE_1)**
        - Character creation 2: *When creating a character, it is important to me that he / she contain some element (emotional, intellectual, spiritual, etc) of 'me'.* **(CHACRE_2)**
        - Character creation 3: *When creating a character, I like them to show some of my real life beliefs and attitudes.* **(CHACRE_3)**

        - Race choice:
            - Race 1: *When creating a character, their race is important to me as a means of expressing some aspect of my real world identity.* **(RACE_1)**
        - Class choice:
            - Class 1: *When creating a character, their class is important to me as a means of expressing some aspect of my real world identity.* **(CLASS_1)**
        - Faction choice:
            - Faction 1: *When creating a character, their faction is important to me as a means of expressing some aspect of my real world identity.* **(FACT_1)**
        - Spontaneity:
            - Spontaneity 1: *When creating characters, I don't really think about their looks, what they say about me, etc at all.* (Reverse Scoring) **(SPONT_1)**
            - Spontaneity 2: *When I create a character, I think a lot about what they'll say about me as a player.* **(SPONT_2)**
        - First character:
            - First character as self 1: *My first 'proper' character contains many elements of what I see as 'myself'.* **(FIRST_1)**

- First character as self 2: *My first 'proper' character is / was very important to me.* **(FIRST_2)**
  - Gender swapping: (Not included in EFA/CFA due to missing data)
    - **Router question**: *I have at least one character which is the opposite gender to my real life gender.*
    - Gender swapping 1: *I deliberately decided to create a character of the opposite sex to my real life gender.* (Yes/No)
    - Gender swapping 2*: The possibility of play a character of a different sex to my real life one gives me an opportunity to express aspects of myself that don't normally get a chance to be conveyed.*
  - Identification development:
    - Time investment
      - Time invested 1: *I identify with my character(s), purely on the basis of how much I have played him / her / them. Beyond that, they don't mean anything special to me.* (Reverse Scoring) **(TIMINV_1)**
      - Time invested 2: *I have to play my characters a while before I feel attached to them.* **(TIMINV_2)**
    - Real world transposing
      - Identity Re-assertion
        - Identity Re-assertion 1: *I started playing a character as if it had a different personality to mine, but as time has gone on, the character has become more like me.* **(IDEREA_1)**
        - Identity Re-assertion 2: *When I started gaming I invented a separate identity for my character(s), but over time they've become more like my real world character.* **(IDEREA_2)**
      - Replication
        - Replication 1: *In the past when creating a character, I wanted him / her to resemble me – either physically or mentally.* **(REPLIC_1)**
        - Replication 2: *With at least one of my characters, when I created him / her it was important that he / she looked like me as much as possible.* **(REPLIC_2)**
  - Life impact
    - **Life impact 1**: *I would say that playing MMOs has had a significant impact upon my life, in terms of how I see myself.* **(LIFIMP_1)**
    - **Life impact 2**: *I would say that playing MMOs has allowed me to learn more about myself.* **(LIFIMP_2)**
    - **Life impact 3**: *MMOs have largely had a positive effect on my real life.* **(LIFIMP_3)**
  - Multiple characters
    - Multiple characters 1: *One reason I have multiple characters is because this enables me to explore different sides of my real world personality.* **(MULCHA_1)**
    - Multiple characters 2: *I have multiple characters because they enable me to experience different aspects of the game.* (Reverse scoring) **(MULCHA_2)**
  - Offline concept of Self
    - **Offline concept of Self 1**: *I feel that at least one of my characters can represent the 'real' me.* **(OFFSELF_1)**

- **Offline concept of Self 2**: *I have deliberately added traits and personality elements to my character, which I don't have in real life.* **(OFFSELF_2)**
- **Offline concept of Self 3**: *I have actively hidden aspects of my real life personality, so they are not shown in my game character(s).* **(OFFSELF_3)**
- **Offline concept of Self 4**: *MMOs allow me to act out parts of myself better than I can do in the real world.* **(OFFSELF_4)**
- **Offline concept of Self 5**: *The chance to express different aspects of myself through a game character(s) is very important to me.* **(OFFSELF_5)**
  - Role play
    - Role play 1: *If I engage in role play, I use it as a means of expressing different parts of my real world self – whether they are hidden aspects or those that I frequently show.* **(ROLPLA_1)**
    - Role play 2: *The ability to role play a character in a MMO is very important to me.* **(ROLPLA_2)**

- Social Interaction
  - Desire for recognition
    - **Desire for Recognition 1**: *When playing an MMO, I like people to know what I've achieved or done in the game.* **(DESREC_1)**
    - **Desire for Recognition 2**: *I think that the way that I present myself in the game is a reflection of my real life identity.* **(DESREC_2)**
  - Friendships
    - **Friendships 1**: *Friendships that I've made through MMOs are very important to me.* **(FRIEND_1)**
    - **Friendships 2**: *Online friendships have had an impact on my real world life.* **(FRIEND_2)**
  - Social referencing
    - **Social referencing 1**: *The fact that MMOs are social environments where I can interact with other people is very important to me.* **(SOCREF_1)**
    - Social referencing 2: *Apart from friends and Guild members, I don't socialise that much with other players.* **(SOCREF_2)**
    - Social referencing 3: *When in game, I think about what I'm saying and doing and how other players might react.* **(SOCREF_3)**

- Motivations
  - Escape
    - **Escape 1**: *Sometimes I play just to escape the pressures of real life, even if only for a little while.* **(ESCAPE_1)**
    - **Escape 2**: *The opportunity to play my MMO and get away from real life for a bit is very important to me.* **(ESCAPE_2)**
  - Offline motivations
    - Offline motivations 1: *It is not important to me whether my character(s) represent me or not, the only reason I play is to have fun.* (Reverse Scoring) **(OFFMOT_1)**
    - **Offline motivations 2**: *I feel that my real world past has influenced my gaming to some extent, in character creation, how I play a character, etc.* **(OFFMOT_2)**

- Fantasizing
  - **Fantasizing 1**: *Sometimes I fantasize about having MMO powers in the real world.* **(FANTAS_1)**
  - **Fantasizing 2**: *On the whole, I don't fantasize about the game when I'm not playing it.* **(Reverse Scoring)** *(FANTAS_2)*
- Gaming history
  - **Gaming history 1**: *Gaming has played an important part in my life for many years.* *(GAMHIS_1)*
  - **Gaming history 2**: *For many years now I've thought of myself as a 'gamer'.* *(GAMHIS_2)*