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INFLUENCING YOUNG ADULT SOCIAL AND PERSONAL IDENTITY THROUGH VIDEO-GAME NARRATIVES

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Abstract

At a time when young adults are building self-identity they are also connecting, in increasing numbers, via massive multi-player online role-playing video games (MMORPGs). Participation in online game playing communities requires assuming the persona of a game character. Young people spend many hours playing the role of a fictional character at the same ages at which developing social identities are influenced. The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of avatar identification on young adult's self-identity through analysis of game player's online communications. Using a qualitative, exploratory design blogs posted to the PlayStation Blog site were analysed for content discussing aspects of individual player's social identity and personal identity. Many players associated themselves with their avatars and avatar traits were often discussed in relation to a players' self-identity. In addition, multi-player social networks were found to impact players' feeling of social acceptance and group connection. We discuss the implications of these findings, both positive and negative, for the development of young people's self-identity and whether the dominant individual focus of games may ultimately influence the fragmentation of communities.

Keywords: Web-Based Communities, Avatar, Video Games, Self-Identity, Social Identity.

1. Introduction

Adolescents are not autonomous members of society, but rather young adults seeking, through family, online and other group interactions, a perception of themselves that is developed through these interactions (McDonald & Kim, 2001). They derive a basic sense of themselves as group members via comparison with others in the formulation of their self-identity. Traditionally, adolescence was viewed as a time of individuation. However, more recent research and theory placed greater emphasis on social affiliations and/or alienation during this period as crucial to identity formation (Newman & Newman, 2001).

The concept of the adolescent crisis, as described by Newman & Newman and based on Erikson's 1968 identity theory in which the period of adolescence is referred to as 'Identity versus Identity Confusion', emphasizes the search for individual identity. Theoretical developments contributing to the adolescent crisis include Marcia's (1966) Identity Development Model, which identified stages through which a young person passes as they explore their identity through social interactions and finally commitment to an identity. Also Josselson, (1994),who determined adolescents required close relationships to evolve rather than psychological distance. Strong connections to family and friends were seen as beneficial to an integrated self-identity (Stringer, 1997; Chickering &Reisser,1993).

Problematic with these theories are the broad brushstrokes drawn across large population groups. To provide a more accurate picture, identity theory has more recently used a

narrower lens to account for diverse populations and to take into account the constantly changing nature of society and its adolescent population. Newman and Newman (2001) implemented a change of focus to a greater emphasis on social identity in the development of self-identity. This focus brings adolescent identity development into line with current adolescent lifestyles. It is suggested that most adolescents will at some time experience a conflict between their sense of social identity and feeling that aspects of their individuality keep them somewhat alienated from larger social groups(Newman and Newman, 2001, p.530). This suggests that social identity, and more particularly the formation of a positive social identity, is a necessary component in adolescent identity formation. However, there are variations in the importance that people ascribe to both personal and social identity.At such an important developmental time, questions arise as to the influence of the strong 'individualistic' themes overwhelmingly promoted in highly popular videogames on these two aspects of self-identity development.

2. Self-identity and New Social Contexts

A number of researchers have pointed out the need for further developments in identity theory in order to account for the changing nature of social contexts. Kroger argues that there is a need to examine identity development in relation to the multiple social contexts many adolescents now experience (Kroger, 2000, p.147). Similarly, Weigert and Gecas contend it must be 'part of an ongoing cultural dynamics informing identity formation' (Weigert & Gecas, 2005, p.172). This need for a more relevant interpretation is reflected in the current narratives found across popular MMORPG video games. Growing numbers of young people are interacting in fictional worlds, most often as an alienated protagonist in search of other groups where they feel a sense of belonging. For example, these might be first-person shooter (FPS) games where players must first work as a team before they can successfully attain their individual goals. Players' scores remain an individual achievement. These styles of games provide a direct role-play experience for game players to interactively delve into the current adolescent crisis.

Role-playing games (RPG) are interactive video games where players deliberately assume the role of a fictional character and determine their actions based on the character they play. Players typically follow a set storyline in which they must successfully overcome obstacles and complete quests during which their character becomes ever stronger (Bostan & Ogut, 2009). Research into the impact of video games has revealed identification with these characters leads to automatic associations with the self. That is, players associate themselves with the same traits as their character in the game. This occurs because game playing increases the automatic accessibility of traits associated with the self during the game in the player's memory (Uhlmann & Swanson, 2004).

The relationship between social identity and personal identity during adolescence can be a complementary one. As young people search for connections and the supportive relationships of the group environment, they discover ways in which communities work and their own place within them. One place many adolescents find a group is in video games, massive multi-player online games and through the fan groups evolving from these and other fictional worlds. It has been recently contended that young adults develop more satisfying ways of being in the world via these fictional worlds. By working out how to bridge the gap between their fictional online world and their real lives, young adults develop their identities in a way that allows them to enact in their own lives, those elements of what they love in their imagined world (Bruns, 2016).

It is strongly contended that reader's experiences in literary worlds also carry over into their real lives and that this should occur as the effects of this are ultimately beneficial (Farrell, 2004; Edmundson, 2004). In stark contrast is the preponderance of research on video games which largely focuses on what is assumed to be mostly negative impacts carrying over into a player's ordinary life. This is very evident in the emphasis given to the dangers of playing violent games, such as in increase in aggression or a decrease in empathy for others

in real life (Sherry, 2001). It is interesting how stark in contrast this is to the positive influences fictional worlds built through engagement with literature are reported to have on social identity. Mace (2013) considers reading a type of 'cognitive stylization' where the reader situates themselves in the expressive works and then brings these experiences 'home' to the real world. An initial submission to the fictional work involves temporarily relinquishing one's self in the work. However, the vision of the text's world is brought back to ordinary living and is then made part of the reader's life. This submission to the fictional world is identical in nature to the submission to the virtual world of video games described in psychology as the experience of 'Presence' (Christy & Fox, 2016). Relinquishing oneself to the narrative in fictional literature is regarded as helpful in enabling readers to progress positively in life. The current project aims to investigate if such experiences can be equally helpful to young adults building aspects of their social and personal identity during submersion in the fictional narratives presented in video games.

At an age when the difference between the inner and outer reality can be quite marked, it can be difficult for a young person to merge the two in real life (Winnicott, 1971). With regards to adolescent identity development, young adult readers and gamers seem to experience heightened attachment to fictional worlds. Part of the explanation may be that adolescence is a time characterised by a new destabilisation of identity which occurs when a young person's identity must be re-established as independent of early parental attachments. This 'psychic restructuring' entails regression exhibited in behaviours common to adolescence, like the idolization of pop stars and other famous characters (Mace, 2013). In the world of video games, this idolization is acted out in real life through massive fan gatherings such as Comicon and Supanova.

Research into massive multi-player online role-playing games have provided empirical confirmation of the link between adolescence and attachments to fictional worlds. These fictional worlds, now often in direct competition to reading, not only offer an alternative world in which to live, but also provide the opportunity to directly interact and act as a character in the story as it unfolds (Bruns, 2016). In some cases, an individual may prefer these imaginary digital lives to the physical world. While games give young adult players a setting in which to work on their self-identity, if the outcomes did not seem to be transferable to the world outside the game this may lead to a player's preference for the game reality over the real world (Smahel, Blinka & Ledabyl, 2008).

Silvey (2006) and others, discuss young adults' aversion to realistic stories about people like themselves. Their preference is to read genre fiction and Science Fiction/Fantasy (SF/F) appears to be a genre of choice. Books' figures show that young adult SF/F 'is amply represented at top of the general bestselling charts of young adult (YA) book sales (Scalzi, 2008). YA writing engages significantly with the lives of the readers for whom they are written. It is evident that most YA genre do, across both literary and game narratives, have something quite profound to say about the lives of young people (Makaresz, 2009).

Within their adventure narrative, video games often address the key concepts of both social identity and personal identity. The manner in which the adolescent crisis of social identity versus alienation is represented in the science fiction/fantasy video games is not yet fully understood. Social identity is defined in this study as the aspect of 'self-theory that focuses on membership and connection with social groups', and alienation being the 'sense of social estrangement' or lack of 'social support or meaningful connection' (Newman & Newman, 1997, p. 678). Just as identity and group affiliation issues were synonymous with adolescent fiction, so to this emphasis needs further investigation as young adolescents shift their new, connected lives into the fantasy realms of massive multi-player online role-playing video games.

Research on the influence of fictional video game worlds on the self-identity development of young adultsis limited. There are valid concerns that some experiences of the online self are transferring to the real world with negative outcomes, such as influencing the use of violent behaviour. It is only through the exploration of young adults' immersion in online worlds

that we can fully understand when and how the online self merges with and transforms into a stronger version of self, and whether the outcomes are positive or negative for adolescent self-identity.

The current project investigated two central facets of self-identity, personal identity and social identity. It is recognised that there are variations in the importance that people ascribe to these dimensions of themselves. The interpersonal level of self, which differentiates the individual as unique from others, exists in an inverse relationship to the social identity level of self, where the individual is identified by group memberships. The Social and Personal Identities Scale (SIPI), operationalises the social and personal identity constructs as conceptually separable levels of the self (Nario-Redmond et al, 2004).In contrast to other approaches that emphasize the context-dependence of self-conception, SIPI was designed to capture individual differences in participants' readiness to categorize themselves using group and personal self-categories as measured by the degree of importance or centrality assigned to each.

The three primary aims of this project were to 1) investigate players' discussions of their avatar's in-game characteristics and experiences and the influence on these on their social or personal self-identity; 2) whether one type of self-identity is influenced more or perceived as more important, and; 3) whether these influences in the game world are reported as influencing their real-world lives.

3. Methods

This study is an exploratory one using qualitative content analysis of online messages sent to Blog.us.playstation.com**. '**PSN Community Spotlight' is a discussion board located on this main Play Station blog site. The messages sent to this section of the site were chosen for analysis as it was specifically placed on the website to provide PlayStation users with a forum to 'share their unique stories, experiences and thoughts'. These messages were therefore personal and informal as opposed to other areas of the website, which provide information of a more specific nature such as new game releases and hardware upgrades. Players submit to the PSN Community Spotlight section via PlayStation Community Forums each week. The only specific requirement imposed by the site hosts in terms of topics to be covered is that topics 'must be related to PlayStation' and 'PlayStation is a big part of our daily lives. Break it down why it's awesome for you' (Blog.us.playstation). Any PlayStation game could be discussed. As a result, posts encompassed a very long list of video games ranging from adventure games to first-person shooter games including Crash Bandicoot, Spyro the Dragon, Final Fantasy VII, Smuggler's Run, Drake's Fortune, Counter-Strike and Call of Duty among others.

Messages posted to the weekly PSN Community Spotlight comprise the data used for the study. Specifically, blogs posted between March 2012 and Jan 2013 (n=38) were analysed for content reporting on where participants discussed either their avatars in-game characteristics or experiences and linked these to aspects of either personal or social identity. The blogs were posted by 38 separate individuals and varied in length from 400 to 1000 words in length. These blogs represent all messages published on the PSN Community Spotlight by the website manager during those dates. The dates were selected because they represent the time that the forum was live on the website. The messages contained within the individual blogs were compared using content analysis in which each line was treated as a separate text unit and coded. Using lines as text units preserved the flow of the text while allowing for fine coding.

During this qualitative analysis, the objective of the coding scheme was to describe the topics addressed in blogs posted to the site and identify themes in blogs which reported on topics related to personal or social self-identity as shared by individual participants. Those topics identified as related to self-identity were also coded as describing incidences occurring either in the game or in the real world. The coding scheme allowed each blog to be coded as including more than one topic related to self-identity.

Findings were initially categorised under Social Identity or Personal Identity, as identified by the Social and Personal Identities scale (SIPI). Within these two groups, further themes emerged requiring a narrower scope of analysis. The themes were determined to separate under the lens of 'Selected' or 'Inherited' Personal Identity. The parameters of each theme are outlined within the methodology detailed below and summarised in Table 1.

Social Identity		Personal Identity	
Self-Selected		Traits of Self	
SS1	The similarity I share with others in my group.	PT1	My rebelliousness
SS2	The memberships I have in various groups.	PT2	My creativity
		PT3	My boldness
		PT4	My non-conformity
Inherited		Singularity of Self	
SI1	My family nationality or nationalities.	PS1	My need to be completely distinct and unique from others.
SI2	The places where I have lived.	PS2	My sense of being different from others.
SI3	My sense of belonging to my own racial group.	PS3	My complete individuality.
SI4	My gender group.	PS4	My sense of independence from others.
SI5	The colour of my skin.		
SI6	My being a citizen of my country.		

Table 1: Social and Personal Identity theme groupings

Social Identity

Two central themes were identified for social self-identity topics describing incidences in the real or game world. These were drawn from the eight items of the Social and Personal Identities Scale measuring social identity. The first, titled 'Social Identity – Self-Selected', covered comments related to the scale items: the similarity I share with others in my group, and; the memberships I have in various groups. The second, titled 'Social Identity – Inherited', covered comments related to the scale items: my family nationality or nationalities; the places where I have lived; my sense of belonging to my own racial group; my gender group; the colour of my skin, and; my being a citizen of my country.

Personal Identity

Two central themes were identified for personal self-identity topics describing incidences in the real or game world. These were drawn from the eight items of the Social and Personal Identities Scale measuring personal identity. The first, titled 'Personal Identity – Traits of Self", covered comments related to the scale items: my rebelliousness; my creativity; my boldness, or; my non-conformity. The second, titled 'Personal Identity – Singularity of Self', covered comments related to the scale items: my need to be completely distinct and unique from others; my sense of being different from others; my complete individuality, and; my sense of independence from others.

To assess inter-rater reliability for the coding scheme, a second coder independently coded a subset of original data (four full blogs representing just over 10% of the data). The subset was generated from a random number list of the PlayStation blogs. The second coder was given explicit criteria for rating. The percentage agreement across coding ranged from 95.7% for personal identity topics through to 89.8% for social/group identity topics.

Once data was gathered, all names and identifying features within the blogs were changed to ensure the privacy of the gamers. Bloggers may have already been using pseudonyms, but this could not be determined, and it was considered that seeing pseudonyms in print might contribute to feelings of exposure. Alphabetic letter identifiers were assigned to all individual bloggers to protect their identities. Excluding this name substitution, all of the statements quoted in this paper are exactly as they appear currently on Blog.us.Playstation.com. No individuals provided any biographical information on the site. However, from the content of the messages that discussed family life, it appeared to be a site accessed prominently by younger adults rather than children. As the site is publically available information, university guidelines did not require ethics approval for this study.

4. Results

The data gathered from the PlayStation blog showed that participants in the blog community often discussed topics related to social and personal identity and that in many instances they related these to their real-world lives. The following examples, taken from blog posts included in the study, are presented and discussed according to their relevance to players' social or personal identity and provide examples of the Social and Personal Identity factors.

Social Identity

Blog posts that rated more highly on social identity also had greater influences from Self-Selected Social Identity factors than Inherited Social Identity factors. Pb28 rated negatively with relation to SS2 factors in the real world. The blog post reveals the addition of positive SS1 factors in the player's online life influenced a real-life discovery that people did enjoy the player's company. A feeling that was not previously present in their real life. This can be seen in the following quote where Pb28 discusses his experiences post interacting with other players in the Fat Princess (FP) video game.

> *'At the time I was in high school and going through a pretty rough patch. I felt like I had almost no friends, and girls weren't particularly interested in me either. This lead to a lot of depression on my end. Which in turn made it really hard to focus on anything. But a few weeks into my FP obsession I decided to get a headset so that I could better cooperate with my team mates at any given time in hopes of maybe winning a bit more often.as it turns out, people thought that I was actually a pretty funny guy and enjoyed my company so they began adding me to their PSN friend lists.' (Pb28)*

Similarly, Pb16 speaks of positive SS2 factors for group membership.

> *'I met a guy who would later end up being one of my closest friends' (Pb16)*

Online experience was attributed by players as being beneficial in extending both group memberships (SS2) and an ability to discover groups similar to the players themselves (SS1), which had been previously missing in the players' real lives. Pb35below discusses the idea of 'hanging out' and 'helping one another' with regard to an online group of friends. The player goes so far as to suggest the online experience of similarity and group membership online (SS1 and SS2) helped them out of a real-life experience of depression.

> *'That experience reminded me that there were people in the world outside of high school and that things won't always stay bad, thusly helping me out of depression. Even better last year while playing games of BlazBlue: Continuum Shift, I met a group of 3 guys who were so much like me we've basically become best friends! We hangout for hours on end every day....and even help one another out with the daily struggles of life... I would never have met them without my PlayStation 3.' (Pb35)*

Participants, as seen in the following comment by Pb22, directly discussed issues related to their use of the site and the influence on their real-life world. Online SS2 self-selected social identity factors were seen as being of equal value to and a positive influence on the participant's real-life.

'Connections like these constantly cause me to question whether or not there really is a legitimate separation between the connections we make with people via the internet and ones we make in real life. I'd go as far as to argue that the bonds I've formed with these individuals are just as real and valid as any I've formed with people in a workplace, or a school. ....They've been there for me through thick and thin, and I know I can pretty much always count on them.' (Pb22)

The influence of players' avatars is directly addressed by Pb19 below, during a discussion of Final Fantasy VII characters, Cloud and Tifa. Here, the player discusses 'fighting against the darkness', with game world descriptions used for the real world. The player has modelled real-life behaviour on game characters in order to achieve positive outcomes. The perceived similarity to the game characters enables increased SS1 factors in the player's life. There is also an increase in SI2 factors flowing into the player's real-life, as lessons learned through avatar characteristics and experiences have been utilised to improve the player's connection with the place in which they live.

'Final Fantasy VII – made me pick myself up and fight back against the darkness – the characters Cloud and Tifa fight for their friends - lessons that when you have good friend by your side there is always hope. The lesson changed my life. I now volunteer in the neighbourhood centre – armed with the knowledge that there are many people who will never give up on each other, I see nothing but a bright future for myself and the neighbourhood.'(Pb19)

Strong social identity factors of SS1 andSS2were found with some participants. SS2 was particularly noted in the Pb2's discussion of childhood memories and gaming. The shared experience between parent and child was highly positive and was regarded as central to building lifelong memories. Career choice was seen by the participant to directly relate to gaming. This real-world influence continues into the participant's current life experience.

'Memories like this really connect me to games. I remember staying up all night every weekend playing video games with my dad. We got our hands on Metal Gear Solid and the game has inspired everything I do. I became a writer because of that game. I don't think I will ever not buy a PlayStation System because I want to keep making new memories and reliving the old ones. It is my hope to pass on the experience I personally get from video games to others. It's nice to see that standing in line for a launch PlayStation is worth it because the experiences you receive will last forever. (Pb2)

Overall, discussion centred on Social Identity factors was stronger in themes related to self-selected rather than inherited social identity factors.

Personal Identity

The heroic narratives present in video games project strong themes of individualism where 'winning' rests on individual achievements and relying on oneself to be strong, unique and outperform others. For example, the strong individualistic emphasis seen in the following quote from Pb21, is largely centred on his participation in game related cos play involving dressing up as fictional characters. The player's emphasis on his character as a heroic being and the focus on his own happiness as a key moral life purpose are evident. The following quote scored heavily on factors related to both PS and PT factors. It is important to note that individualism scored higher in participants with high personal identity scores as opposed to those with high social identity scores.

'Never in my life did I think I would one day be surrounded by throngs of excited fans with my hand raised squinting off into an imaginary desert...but like Drake quoted

from TE Lawrence about the dreamers of the day…'they may act their dreams with open eyes, to make it possible.' (Pb21)

Despite this being a description of a group activity identified by the player, there is no discussion of meaning gained from group membership or similarity. Rather, the emphasis is on the participant's individual gain, of making dreams possible, and their individual role within the group. The player describes being 'surrounded by throngs of excited fans', high PT2/3/4 and PS1/2/3/4, as opposed to being part of or sharing a group experience with fans. Pb21 continues:

'The Uncharted series (Drake's Fortune, Among Thieves, Drake's Deception) struck a huge chord with me…starting with Drakes' Fortune, I was introduced to a funny, confident and capable treasure hunter, someone that his friends loved.'

The third-person, action adventure video game features the main character, Nathan Drake. Pb21 mentions that several of Drake's characteristics, which are seen as positive and beneficial to the character: as they would also be to the player in real-life.

'Also Big Boss of Metal Gear Solid. The name Snake (in the gaming world) is synonymous with manliness and superhuman will – which is what drew me to Metal Gear in the first place, and I think that I'm pretty physically fit, so why not?'(Pb21)

Likewise, Pb21 discusses the appeal of Big Boss and Solid Snake from another action adventure game, Metal Gear Solid. The appeal of these avatars for Pb21, Snake in particular, is characteristics like 'manliness' and 'superhuman will'. In the final line Pb21 equates these avatar characteristics with the player's personal physique suggesting that these characters are a good representation of the player's real-life self.

'I have a hard time explaining what the feeling is like to people who've never done cosplay. I feel a rush of confidence, childlike fun and excitement. When I clip into my STABO harness as Snake, I'm no longer (…) to the world, I'm a war hero, a fighter and a lover of cardboard boxes. As I hook my arms through my leather gun holster as Drake, I become a treasure hunter and a loveable smart aleck.'(Pb21)

Here, the player directly discusses the increased Personal Identity factors, both PT and PS, received during the act of cosplaying these game avatars. Confident, hero, hunter: the player's real-world feelings of positive individual personal identity are directly influenced by the game world and the characters/avatars within.

'Doing Cosplay has been one of the biggest joys of my life. I get to be whoever I want to be and actually get praised and respected if I pull it off'…'I love the boost in confidence that I get back from the positive feedback..' (Pb21)

Pb21 talks about the responses of others as a positive outcome. However, there is no way the participant could be coded to be representative of the social themes, as everything talked about refers back to the player as an individual. In contrast, Pb12 discusses cosplay and is coded to have experienced increased positive social identity themes.

'This hobby also led me to meet tons of amazing like-minded and enthusiastic individuals who dress up to celebrate their favourite characters." (Pb12)

Be it social or personal identity themes, players expressed what they regarded as positive outcomes with regard to their game world avatars' influence on real-world feelings.

"..look out world, Drake and Snake are coming to town. I throw on my costumes and head out feeling ten feet tall.' (Pb32)

Pb32's costume is an alternative, improved, personal identity for the participant. No longer burdened by their own personal identity, the assuming of the avatar's personal identity provides an overall increase in both PT and PS factors.

As with traditional narrative formats, game characters and narratives were seen in this sample to form positive life-long memories for participants. The confidence gained through these very real memories, gained in-game, increased PS1/2/3/4 factors.

> *'I really can't begin to name all the iconic titles that absorbed hours of my life. Final Fantasy 9, Grandia, World of Arms 2, Resident Evil, Silent Hill, Chrono Cross, Legend of Legaia, Arc the Lad…I could go on for hours about all the experiences and memories I hold dearest because of the games I spent my youth playing. These were my fairy tales, the stories that I built my young childish imagination around, I could be a brave knight traveling the harsh wilderness to save a beautiful princess from a vile wizard, or I could be a giant robot blowing up other robots because…well, who cares why? I'm a giant robot and that is RAD!' (Pb08)*

The game-world influence ranked strongly for Pb08 on factors influencing personal identity more than social identity. The discussion is primarily individualistic with no reference to any shared experience of gaming either in-game or real-world.

First person, multiplayer, shooter games resulted in discussions that centred around players taking on the emotions of the avatar. Pb9 provides a number of examples of this. The initial quote uses the description of 'my character's body'. Subsequent discussion becomes a first-person account as the participant identifies as the avatar and experiences real-world emotion based on the avatar's in-game experience.

> *'as a shell exploded into my character's body, I felt a sense of annoyance.'*
>
> *'this time was able to get out of spawning area and I was off to the races. My team were the counter-terrorists and I was tasked with taking out the terrorists. The level was a warehouse and not too long after playing, I encountered my first enemy. I fired away at him and felt pride as I got my first kill ever.'*
>
> *'When I was a soldier I felt afraid and immediately flocked to the best spot to say away from being infected. When I did become infected, it was a bummer..'*
>
> *'See you on the battlefield and as always, game on and stay thirsty my friends.'(Pb9)*

Among participants ranking highly on Personal Identity, positive real-world influences continued into other aspects of life. For Pb27, 'strength' and 'determination' gained through gaming led to increased PT2 factors in the real world.

> *'…for giving me the strength and determination to do whatever I set my mind to. Games inspired me to take my art to the next level – games fuelled inspirations to create new projects, sketches and create new characters.'(Pb27)*

The idea of gaming experiences being life-changing was discussed in multiple posts and the sense of long-term experience and development introduced.

> *'…took eight years of trial and error to beat a game nothing in the world could compare to beating the game that changed my life in many ways – ended up feeling anything was possible and dreams do become a reality'. (Pb26)*

Overall, positive discussions and game-world influence were common for participants with high Personal Identity factor rankings.

5. Discussion

The primary aim of this project was to investigate player discussions of their avatar's in-game characteristics and experiences and the influence of these on their social and personal self-identity; whether one type of self-identity is influenced more or perceived as more important and whether these game-world influences are reported as influencing players' real-world lives.

Drawing from the Social and Personal Identities Scale (SIPI), central themes were established. From the social identity aspects of discussions, the themes of 'Self-Selected

Social Identity' and 'Inherited Social Identity' emerged. From the Personal Identity aspects of discussions, the themes of 'Traits of Self Personal Identity' and 'Singularity of Self Personal Identity' emerged. In the area of Social Identity self-selected social identity factors ranked more highly than inherited social identity factors. Players identified mostly positive real-world influences emerging from in-game experiences of their avatars. These were identified by some players as strong enough to assist in dealing with real-world feelings such as depression. In the area of Personal Identity, a more equal ranking between traits of self and singularity of self-emerged. Interestingly, intergenerational value in the shared experience of gaming emerged in discussions centred on both Social and Personal Identity. The following section discusses the findings of the present study within the context of current theories of social and personal identity, and particularly in relation to fictional worlds and gaming.

Prior studies found that an emphasis on social identity does not seem to simultaneously reduce the importance of personal identity (Nario-Redmond, Biernat, Eidelman, & Palenske, 2004). However, in the PlayStation Blog the importance of Personal Identity was far more central and seemed to be placed as being of greater importance than Social Identity. This could be a reflection of the game designs, which most often have players interacting as an individual even during multi-player online games. Even in team challenges, individual high scores are consistently seen as the prime motivation for playing.

An exception to this was people who had started playing video games due to feelings of either loneliness or being outcast from social groups in their real lives. For these players, the social dimension of their self-identity, both self-selected and inherited, started and remained of high importance throughout their discussion. For many of these game players their discussion centred on the importance of the multiplayer aspect of gaming in overcoming prior loneliness and feelings of exclusion from in-group memberships. However, they do not appear to place greater significance on Social Identity themes, but rather discuss group membership and how it contributes to their individual happiness in relation to Personal Identity themes.

The Social and Personal Identities Scale (SIPI) has been used to test the hypothesis that fans of Ayn Rand, known as an author who strongly emphasised individualism in her philosophy of 'objectivism', would rank higher for personal identity themes than non-fans. The findings showed that fans, familiar with the author's concept of man as a heroic being, did indeed rank significantly higher on personal identity than non-fans (Nario-Redmond et al, 2004).

Similarly, the present analysis of video game players found increased rankings for themes of personal identity. Video games are most often played in pursuit of an individual goal even when linked with others in gameplay and winning the game is focused on achieving individual high scores, which is fitting with Rand's philosophy. Clearly evident in both studies is the presence of narratives that emphasise playing the heroic, being strong and unique. This focus may become a potent influence in self-identity formation when mixed with the dominant Western individualistic cultural script, which emphasises the value of individualism and independence over collectivism and interdependence (Markus & Kityama, 1991). Personal identity was consistently rated as more important than social identity in this study. With sources such as the PlayStation blog open to a global audience, further research into the cultural origins of players and differentiation of findings could prove invaluable to a deeper understanding of the influence of gaming on development of self-identity.

In prior research outside the gaming context, it has been asserted that a high private self-consciousness may lead an individual to a focus on personal aspects of their identity as opposed to their social identity which may be of more interest to people with high public self-consciousness(Nario-Redmond, 2004).When viewing this in relation to the current study the question arises as to whether video games are contributing to higher private self-consciousness or are players attracted to these games because of pre-existing identity factors relating to high private self-consciousness? As the numbers of people connecting in MMORPGs are immense and continually increasing, it would be expected that a cross

section of both groups would be present in these online communities. However, it is important to consider that younger people whose self-identity is still at integral stages of formation may be negatively impacted by the individual focus of games at a time when as a society we are trying to address issues of fragmented communities.

Throughout the analysis a further point for future consideration emerged: were participants who were lonely or depressed in their real lives more likely to rate their social identities as more important than personal identity as their purpose for joining was to seek out like-minded friends and group memberships? It may be that those who enjoyed strong social affiliations and memberships in their real lives were more likely to use the discussion forum to make personal statements because their focus was on winning games rather than connecting. Perhaps social and personal identity may be equally important, but only one aspect of self-identity can be secured at a time when in the crucial young adult phase of development. Extrapolating further, is it only after an individual's social identity is secured that the focus can shift to pursue the individualist script? As previously discussed, Newman and Newman (2001) strongly emphasised the impact of a secure sense of social identity was a necessary component of a healthy, balanced self-identity. Too much focus and emphasis on individuality risks keeping young adults alienated from larger social groups (Newman and Newman, 2001). The current study did find the influence of the strong 'individualistic' themes promoted in highly popular videogames resulted on much stronger themes emphasising personal identity. Gaming, and the social networking that forms around it, provide an outlet to explore the influence of individualistic themes and their influence on how important or not social connectedness is for modern connected youth.

Adolescent identity development for many is entwined with the young adult fiction with which they engage. Such fictional narratives can be accessed via traditional book formats, but increasingly also though a wide variety of technological platforms including games. Young adult fictional characters representing Erikson's period of adolescence are dealing with some form of conflict between group identity and alienation (Newman & Newman, 2001). Realistic fiction, science fiction and fantasy all capably represent this crisis. Increasingly science fiction and fantasy are a genre that today's adolescent wants to engage with (Makaresz, 2009) making the narratives in gaming worlds desirable and highly influential pathways for the exploration of identity by adolescents. Added to the increasing research demonstrating the psychological influence of games (Przybylski, Rigby & Ryan, 2010)the theoretical underpinnings of young adult fantasy online games, with regard to identity in particular, is an area in need of further research. The combination of the massive numbers interacting online in these games via the identity of their avatars and the access of the multiple blogs and fan sites in public forums, make it possible to explore important thematic discourses and situates online narrative games as a genre worthy of interpretation and research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it was determined that players were easily distinguished according to their degree of social or personal identification due to the disproportionate discussion of individual attributes of self, versus those discussing the importance of friends and social groups. Those who selected highly individualised games such as Drake and Snake ranked more highly in areas of personal identity, while players who chose more groupsfocused games such as Fat Princess Bazblue, ranked more highly on social identity. It is interesting to note that game selection could therefore predict whether personal or social aspects of self would be emphasised more by a player. The stability with which people chose game genres reflecting their emphasis on personal versus social identification would indicate this is a rich source for further exploration of the influence of game narratives on self-identity development.

With increasing numbers engaging in game play that aims to exert the individual self over others and over game environments and societies the question of whether such games negatively influence social self-identity to encourage expansion of the individualistic

personal identity need to be further explored. The potential for impacting self-identity in the real world, by encouraging individuals to place higher worth on their own interests over social connectedness, would indicate the findings of this initial exploratory study should be the focus of future research.

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