

Going Beyond the Game: Development of Gamer Identities Within Societal Discourse and Virtual Spaces

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Abstract

What is a ‘gamer’? And what does it mean to be a gamer today? This paper will address these questions through a theoretical discussion of the gamer identity in terms of its construction within society, both virtual and within offline communities. A multi-modal model of gamer identity will then be proposed that incorporates the relationships between the gamer identity and the various contexts in which it is developed and maintained. Drawing from social identity theory, it is argued that the gamer identity is multifaceted and extends beyond game playing habits or preferences.

Author Keywords

Social identity; gamer; gaming; stereotyping; self-categorization; self-identification

Introduction

Digital games (or video games) have grown to be an integral part of everyday life for millions of people around the globe. Representative data gathered from the Entertainment Software Association (ESA) in 2014 reported that 59% of all Americans play video games, with nearly equal distribution across gender lines (52% of male/48% female) (ESA, 2014). Similar rates of play have been found in other countries around the world, including Flanders (the Dutch-speaking area of Belgium, 41.2%) and Singapore (41.1%) (Quandt, Chen, Mäyrä, & Van Looy, 2014). University student surveys report even higher rates of video game play, with an average of 90% reporting a history of video game use (see Colwell & Kato, 2003; Kowert, Griffiths, & Oldmeadow, 2012).

Almost since the advent of this new, playful technology, and its popularization through arcade parlors and home consoles, we have referred to those who enjoy playing video games as

“gamers”. Despite the ubiquity of this term in our everyday vernacular, what this term actually means and whom it refers to remains actively debated, particularly among researchers. While some use the term *gamer* as a simple denotation to categorize people who play video games and those who do not, others have adopted it as an identifier of one’s personal and social identity. The latter use of the term has been slowly gaining popularity among researchers in the last few years as the advent of gaming communities, such as the numerous clans, guilds and online web forums¹, hinted at a sense of group identity amongst people who play and enjoy video games. However, a consensus is far from being reached. Some have even argued that the term *gamer* should no longer be used to classify certain individuals, because traditional understandings of the *gamer* identity are outdated - i.e. young, socially outcast, white males (Alexander, 2014; Golding, 2014). The core message of this identity, it is argued, was clear: “Have money. Have women. Get a gun and then a bigger gun. Be an outcast. Celebrate that. Defeat anyone who threatens you. You don’t need cultural references. You don’t need anything but gaming” (Alexander, 2014, para. 13). This identity hailed from gaming being an unusual activity, a sociocultural niche, and was established to define and unite a group of male players, whilst differentiating it from other subcultural movements (Golding, 2014). This began to shift when gaming extended out of the niche of being an exclusive phenomenon predominated by mostly male players, through the increasing number of female players to the current state of almost equal distribution between the genders (ESA, 2014). Since society experiences these “fundamental shifts in the videogame audience, and a move towards progressive attitudes within more traditional areas of videogame culture” (Golding, 2014, para. 8), it is argued that the traditional *gamer* identity is rendered culturally obsolete. In Alexander’s (2014) words, the *gamer* “is over” – in its meaning of being a solely male and market-shaped identity.

This, in turn, raises the question what it means if an individual chooses to call themselves a *gamer* apart from the traditional image. Who is the *gamer* of the ‘new videogame audience’? An individual might still choose to adopt a *gamer* identity because it is important to him/her. But how does one constitute this identity along individual significances? As it stands now, the only agreement one can come to about the term *gamer* seems that it holds a negative connotation in social discourse (Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008; Shaw, 2012; Kowert et al., 2012; Kowert, 2014) and is still often discussed as a socially marginal phenomenon.

This paper will take a closer look at the term *gamer* and explore its relevance among the game playing community in terms of its association with personal and social identities. This will include an exploration of who is a *gamer*, what it means to be a *gamer*, and the connotations this term holds for game players themselves as well as society at large. This will be done by presenting in-depth analysis of the term *gamer* across micro (i.e., the *gamer* as an individual) and macro (i.e., the *gamer* in the context of virtual communities) perspectives. Following this, we will present a multi-modal theoretical framework for approaching the *gamer* identity.

Exploring the *gamer* identity

While we hear the term *gamer* often in the media, popular culture, and perhaps within our own social group, it is not exactly clear who or what this term is referring to. Is it simply a way to differentiate between people who play video games and those who do not? Is it referring to a specific subset of video game players? Perhaps, those who not only play video games often but

also are interested in video game news, video game fashion, and video game lore. The following section will discuss three potential interpretations of the term gamer in an attempt to understand what this term actually refers to – Is it a social identity? A social group? Or an interpersonal identity? This will be followed by a discussion of *who* the research community categorizes as a gamer. A core problem of interpreting the term gamer is that, regardless of which approach one may take, it remains relatively unclear who exactly is being referred to when enlisting such a label.

‘Gamer’ versus ‘Player’

Before discussing the term gamer, we need to point out the possible differences from the term player. Following Juul (2010), being a player of digital games is primarily defined through engaging in the interactional activity of playing:

A player is someone who interacts with a game, and a game is something that interacts with a player; players choose or modify a game because they desire the experience they believe the game can give them.

Juul (2010), p. 9

This interaction requires different levels of skill and effort (Juul, 2010) and varies in motivation to play (Dalisay, Kushin, Yamamoto, Liu & Skalski, 2014; Lin, Lin & Yang, 2015) and gratifications sought by the player (Klimmt, 2006; Wimmer, 2013). How involved a player may be within the gameplay and associated community depends on their experiences with and expectations towards multiple motivational variables such as personal gaming performance, interaction possibilities, sociability, status concerns, believability of game contents, involvement in game narratives, escapism and pastime or also moral self-reaction (De Grove, Cauberghe & Van Looy, 2014). The game itself provides the player with these gaming experiences through interaction with the narrative and game mechanics, framed by the overall social context during playing (Elson, Breuer, Ivory & Quandt, 2014). These factors, along with demographics such as age and gender, can be used to describe a player and their engagement with digital games. Thus, in accordance to Juul’s (2010) assertion, we define a player as a person, who performs the act of playing a digital game under the conditions of his/her personal patterns of media usage.

However, engaging in a media-related activity such as playing games does not essentially involve internalization of related sociocultural aspects other people might hold towards it. For example, a person watching a game of football on TV does not necessary inhabit the fan culture and practices related to a team or view him-/herself as a fan of sport at all. As is to be shown, considering oneself a gamer requires a complex construct of multidimensional social influence factors that reach beyond the mere act of playing digital games.

As such, the terms *player* and *gamer* should be distinguished from each other based on their level of personal importance they might hold for an individual. This is also meant as a differentiation by short-term and long-term effects of (medial) socialization: A player is a temporary, functional status as the role of an interactor one obtains while playing a digital game.

This means that a person who has never played a digital game would be considered a player the moment they interact with a game. A gamer, in contrast, is a concept that comprises longtime aspects of self-construction and self-perception, as well as individual societal and cultural positioning.

In the following sections, we will explore this distinction further as we explore the gamer as a self-concept and its associations with sociocultural dimensions that mark it a social identity.

What is a gamer?

According to Kirkpatrick's (2012) analysis of UK gaming magazines from the 1980s and 1990s, gaming culture and the gamer identity evolved around strategies of "distancing the playing of computer games from other elements of the computer culture" (Kirkpatrick, 2012, para. 53). In this sense, gaming media was "centrally concerned with the construction of a sense of community among gamers" (ibid., para. 42), addressing and ultimately helping formulate the predominantly male gamer identity as described by Alexander (2014) and Golding (2014). This construction through differentiation from other sociocultural contexts within video game history indicates that gamer identities are not independent from pre-existing societal structures: "Identity as a gamer, like all identities, exists as a conversation between the individual and social, structural discourses" (Shaw, 2013, para. 5). Thus, within these societal structures, we also need to consider it a chosen identity:

As an identity defined by consumption, identifying as a gamer is more clearly a choice than are identities more directly written on the body, defined by kinship structures, and/or dictated by legislation. [...] Like other forms of identity, being a gamer is defined in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games, the deployment of subcultural capital, the context in which players find themselves, and who are the subjects of game texts.

Shaw (2013), para. 1

As noted by De Grove, Courtois & Van Looy (2015), consumption of digital games as well as an individual's knowledge of digital games and related paratextual material (e.g. gaming magazines) add to the cultural capital of performing a gamer identity. This cultural capital also connects to available social capital: "Having the opportunity to talk about digital games to other people can provide a means through which one can identify as a gamer at given moments" (p. 347). Reviewing possible contextual dimensions of influence on what is a gamer, it becomes apparent that these social indicators in need of recognition are complex and may extend beyond allocations applied to an individual by others:

While the term is often used as a shorthand to organize the world into people who play video games and people who do not, self-identifying as a gamer also signifies a shared identity with other members of the broader gaming community and culture and denotes an alignment with the group's idiosyncrasies, traditions, and social practices. [...] Being a 'gamer' is more than just a label given from the outside; it is a

part of one's self-conception and an expression of one's affiliation with a group of society.

Kowert (2014), para. 5

At this point, we can decipher two main social levels between which processes of developing the gamer identity can occur: On the one hand, there is society with an embedded cultural understanding of gaming. On the other hand, there is the individual gamer with his/her general self-concept, shaped by self-categorization and personally negotiated in the social contexts with others. In these contexts, the gamer identity is a choice to communicate and perform, based on the individual's self-perception. This makes the gamer identity subject to social and cultural indicators such as the individual's embedding in friendship networks, social groups and overall social environment as well as his/her position towards societal perceptions of gaming (De Grove, Courtois & Van Looy, 2015). The gamer identity is also tied to the use and consumption of digital games as its value-centered medium. Practicing this identity thus likely involves not only playing the games, but attributing a certain importance to them, displaying knowledge of and communicating about them. To further explore the gamer identity, we therefore need to consider different dimensions of personal and societal identification as well as social connections to the virtuality of digital games.

I am a gamer: Gamer as an interpersonal / a social identity

The term gamer has come to be used by some to identify as a member of the gaming community. As mentioned previously, the gamer identity and gamer cultures have been given widespread mainstream recognition through their integration in media and popular culture, such as in the plot of several television programs (e.g., *South Park*, *The Big Bang Theory*) and premise for many Hollywood blockbusters (e.g., *Tomb Raider*, *Street Fighter*, *Hitman*) (Bergstrom, Fisher & Jenson, 2014). Fashion trends have also begun catering to the gaming community, with numerous web-based stores selling apparel that celebrates all things gaming related. For example, *jinx.com* describes their online clothing store as providing unique apparel for "gamers and geeks". The gamer identity has developed alongside its cultural emergence, and has come to be associated with its own traditions and behaviors.

Choosing to self-identify as a gamer is a vastly different process than being given a 'gamer' categorization from an outside source. As such, there are many important differences between an individual who plays video games and does not identify as a gamer and someone who does. As discussed by Hall (1966), identification within a particular social group (such as gamers) is the self-definition of the individual rather than categorizations based on static definitions of identity applied from the outside. This social identity (i.e., the ways in which one socially defines oneself in relation to others) becomes "part of an individual's self-concept" (Tajfel, 1979, p. 255) and contributes to feelings of belongingness and self-worth (Branscombe & Wann, 1991) and positive self-esteem (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Branscombe, 1998).² Besides a social or group identity, individuals who self-identify as a gamer are also adopting a personal identity associated with the group, which comprises personal characteristics, preferences and interests. These, again, allow for comparison with other individuals' personalities and recognizing similarities shared with other people (Turner & Oaks, 1989).

The interplay between personal and social identity can be illustrated in the following example. Imagine an American teacher, who is forty years old, married and has two children. All these aspects categorize his/her social identity within society (by categories of nationality, profession and civil status). However, the teacher might also be particularly interested in the field of gaming and likes to share his/her experiences with friends. This interest itself and the recognition that his/her friends share the same interests are aspects of the teacher's personal identity (additionally, the teacher might consider him-/herself a gamer). Both these identity structures allow for (self) identification within society as well as (self) perceptive identification with or belonging to certain social groups. Thus, identification as a gamer derives from the personal self-concept as well as from situating oneself in an overall societal context.

They are gamers: Gamers as social group

Despite a lack of general consensus about who is a gamer, a clear 'gamer stereotype' has emerged in popular culture. Often referred to as the stereotype of gamers (Williams, 2005; Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2012; Kowert et al., 2012), gaming and gaming cultures are widely discussed as a socially marginal phenomenon, with gamers themselves being associated with a range of negative attributes and outcomes. Described by Williams (2005) as "isolated, pale-skinned, teenage boys" (p.2), this stereotypical gamer has been the target of ridicule and satire for numerous television shows and web series (Kowert et al., 2012; Bergstrom, Fisher & Jenson, 2014). Thus, the *social* consensus as to what constitutes a gamer, or stereotype of online gamers, is quite clear: gamers are young males who are isolated, unattractive, overweight, and obsessed with playing video games as well as "social outcasts that are unable or unwilling to integrate into mainstream society" (Kowert, 2014, para. 8). This stereotypical characterization continues to be perpetuated by representations in the media today. As a source of popular culture (Consalvo, 2006; Kowert et al., 2012), media outlets are transporting these images to both recipients with and without a personal link to gaming and gamers alike. Despite this, it should be noted that these sort of negative characterizations, while widely held as cultural beliefs, are only endorsed as accurate representations by those who do not consider themselves a member of the gaming community (Kowert et al., 2012). Thus, self-identified gamers may define being a gamer in contrast to these perceived societal stereotypes and formally reject these negative characterizations, perhaps in an attempt to differentiate their social group from other groups (Hebdige, 2002; Hall, 1996). Alternatively, gamers may attribute perceived stereotypes to other gamers rather than to themselves, denying common stereotypes' applicability to their own self-concept (Bergstrom, Fisher & Jenson, 2014), in the sense of perceived *third-person effects* (Davison, 1983) or because of a desire to not be socially stigmatized. However, the individual's possibilities to differentiate him-/herself from the stereotypes are limited to a certain degree on at least two levels. Firstly, they are physiognomically limited in that one's outward appearance might correspond with the stereotypes, making it difficult for the individual to contrast these components of the stereotype towards others. Secondly, they are limited in performance in that the individual has to 'prove' that he/she does not live up to the stereotype. For example, a self-identified gamer may lead a healthy social life and may still be judged an 'isolated outcast' upon stating that he/she enjoys playing digital games. Thus, while the individual may try to differentiate him-/herself from the gamer stereotypes, others might still judge him/her according to the stereotypes.

Additionally, there is a lack of general consensus about who is a gamer among the gaming community itself. Self-identified gamers may hold a broad variety of opinions on what one needs to be a ‘legitimate’ member of their social group (Shaw, 2013; Kowert, 2014; De Grove, Courtois & Van Looy, 2015). For example, criteria hereof may be the amount of knowledge about digital games and their references, gaming experiences in general or the ability to join in a conversation about games and follow up discussions on recent gaming subjects. If someone does not meet these terms or plays the ‘right’ games, he/she might face the problem of not being ‘allowed’ to be called a ‘real’ gamer in the face of the social group of gamers (Golding, 2014). Thus, the gamer identity is dependent on how gamers see themselves as representatives of the gaming community.

Taken together, we can conclude that identification with the social group of gamers is shaped by sociocultural representations of the gamer image within society as well as depends on the extent to which an individual contrasts with or adopts these representations as a heteronomous concept. The mere act of social stereotyping hints at the uniqueness of the social identity of gamers, however, who is self-identifying as a gamer and what individuals constitute the gaming community remains somewhat debatable.

We are gamers: Gamers as a (virtual) community identity

Social identity is particularly pertinent within public, situational contexts (Hall, 1996) as in a social space, an individual becomes a member within the broader community. It is in this social space that individual identities become further developed through interaction with other members of one’s community (Hecht, 1993). In the context of gaming for example, discussing one’s favorite games can provide a common ground for conversation with one’s peers. Playing games together can also help to strengthen peer bonds by providing shared experiences (Fritz, Lampert, Schmidt, & Witting, 2011). Personal performance and outward expression within the community further contribute to the strength of one’s individual gamer identity. One’s personal gamer identity thereby not only becomes visible and potentially strengthened through social interactions, but it also provides the opportunity to create a shared identity with one’s peers. These interactions and relationships with other gamers can be strong connectors for establishing a communal spirit, which, in turn, may help to strengthen one’s interpersonal, social and virtual identities through the adoption of common objects (Hebdige, 2002), such as specific ways of dressing, speaking, sociocultural practices or interactional behavior.

In relation to the gaming community, we can find these mechanisms in the use of pop-cultural references drawn from digital games. Examples here include actual icons (the *Triforce* from *The Legend of Zelda* games), solid objects (a replica of digital game weaponry) and also phrases (the saying ‘*The cake is a lie*’ from the *Portal* games), behavior (cosplay – portraying game characters) and music (humming the *Tetris* theme). Referring to these symbols (and also recognizing the reference itself) makes a person identifiable as a member of the social group of gamers and, by enlisting these objects and icons, validates one’s social identity as a gamer within the gaming community. By adopting these symbolic values and practices, gamers “form a unity with the group’s relations, situation, experiences” (Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts, 2004, p.

56). Additionally, attaching the group-related symbolic meaning to one's self-concept can contribute to the strength of one's self-categorization as a gamer (Hecht, Jackson & Pitts, 2005).

However, one cannot fully understand gaming identities without discussing their uniqueness in the way that they relate to a specific medium – digital games. The gaming environment itself enables individuals to explore aspects of secondary, virtual identities while interacting in digital environments (Klimmt, 2006; Fritz, 2011). For example, virtual in-game representations of the players, or their avatar, can become an essential part of the identification process (Fritz, 2011) and may be tightly connected to a gamer's personality (Banks & Bowman, 2014). Furthermore, just as it is the case for public contexts of the physical world, a gamer's avatar is not alone in the virtual game world. He/she is surrounded by dozens of players interacting with and within the game simultaneously, which affects elements of gameplay. There is also a *need* for interaction created by the players present in the virtual game context, shaping an expanding in-game society of its own:

Players rely on other players' characters for training, information, and resources, forming groups and intergroup collaborations. Players' reliance on others gives rise to robust communities in which players transact their relationships through their virtual characters not only in the game but also through instant messaging, Web forums, e-mail, and voice over IP networks.

Bessière et al. (2007), p. 530

Technology and interaction have created an overlap between the virtual and the physical societal world, forming what we could call an 'in-game-out-of-game' community. Community structures built up by gamers within the game extend into physical world communities 'outside' the game. For example, players often create organized in-game collaborations, to achieve common goals or achieve successful at the game. Such formations consist, for instance, in computer-based game communities with long-term focus including clans, guilds and alliances (Geisler, 2009). The formation's members then might not only chat in-game, but also stay in contact through networking as stated above. Platforms like a clan forum, for example, can be used to discuss the current game, plan future in-game interactions or chat in and out of context of the game. Members of a virtual community thereby do not actually have to be present in the game to link to their guild or clan. Relationships initially established in-game can thus be transported into out-of-game contexts, where they might also include potential face-to-face meetings of clan members in the physical world. Identification with the virtual community this way may reach into the individual's out-of-game community.

Like the physical world, virtual communities also hold a set of shared practices and symbolic values to refer to so that members can identify with it and show or prove their belonging. Virtual formations like clans and guilds also refer to symbolic objects to demonstrate their factional status in the virtual game world. In Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) like *Guild Wars* and *World of Warcraft*, it is common practice to let the avatar wear a certain guild's coat of arms, once the player belongs to that guild (Wimmer, 2013). This may be used to express identification with the guild, while distinguishing oneself from other guilds. While playing the game and traversing the game world with the coat of arms visible on

the avatar, the gamer symbolizes that he/she acts in the name of their respective in-game group of choice – whether it be done intentionally or not. This illustrates how aspects of a gamer’s in-game identity may be perceived by third parties if made visible. Originally virtual symbols like coats of arms might also be used in out-of-game contexts to represent affiliation. A clan or guild might decorate their web forums with it, for example. Gamers, in turn, might then refer to their clan’s coat of arms with other gamers in physical world contexts to state their allegiance. This way, clan emblems and coat of arms become icons of symbolic value that represent the clan as collaborating community within and beyond the game context.

The reciprocal interplay of the aspects stated above form bridges between the virtual gaming community (what happens in-game) and the out-of-game gaming community (what it feels like to be a gamer). While this bridging aspect is not specific to gamer identities (as players may experience the same described mechanisms), it could be an integral part of an individual’s identification as a gamer as gamers may engage in these bridging aspects in a meaningful way, actively perceiving and seeking them as a way to connect to the overall gaming culture and its community structures. Conversely, players who do not self-identify as gamers may enjoy the level of social interaction provided by these mechanisms or the multiplayer game mechanics as a source of entertainment without personally linking them to sociocultural identification processes. It is then a question of personal value, if one attributes said mechanisms to defining his/her personal and social identity.

Interaction in the context of actual online multiplayer gameplay often requires creation of a virtual character as a representative of one’s self, which marks a crucial step of identity reference in the gaming world. As Bessière et al. (2007) note, “players are referred to by their character’s name, and they interact with others as that character” (p. 531). If a gamer does not give away any other personal information (true name, personality, behavior etc.), his/her in-game identity may thus only be addressed through the avatar.

It needs to be taken into account that not all genres and forms of digital games are equally potent in projecting and producing virtual identity. For example, the identity mechanisms represented through avatar creation and the in-game community discussed here are primarily limited to MMORPGs, as they allow for these specific forms of identity exploration. When playing within other genres, such as action-adventure, puzzle, or strategy/simulation, one is unlikely to experience the same feeling of having a persistent virtual representation of self. However, a player of these kind of games would still likely experience the embodiment of a temporary, virtual role, for example that of an emperor, major, or Italian plumber. Also, given the possibilities of contributing to online gaming community platforms, a player may also be active within a community belonging to these games (for example, he/she might discuss game elements of a puzzle game on a corresponding online forum). In this sense, even games without creation of avatars (or online components at all) can contribute to the production of relationships within a gaming community. Identity aspects regarding the virtual in-game space as presented in this paper mainly focus on elements of character creation and online multiplayer interaction.

Who is a gamer? – Academic perspectives

As we can derive from the aspects stated above so far, the social identity of gamers appears to be a multi-faceted concept with numerous influences from physical and virtual worlds. However, quantification of the term *gamer* from a research perspective is far from integrating these various influences. When reviewing the literature it becomes clear that an integrative definition of the term *gamer* does not exist. In fact, gamers seem to be primarily addressed through defining characteristics of certain player types (online players, casual players, problematic players). The description of gamers then tends to be based on categorization sets. For example, one may differ between casual gamers (players who primarily engage in gaming spaces that do not require a large amount of time or special skills to complete) and hardcore gamers (players who spend a large amount of time gaming, aim at completing every feature of a certain game or have several years of gaming experience) (Shaw, 2012). Schott & Horrell (2000) focus on self-identified “girl gamers” and their relation to the field of gaming, examining differences in playing styles and gaming orientation of female players. Jansz & Martens (2005) address visitors of LAN gaming events as a specific group of gamers, an approach that exemplifies how gamer identity may be described depending on a certain social context. Pearce (2008) focuses on age in relation to gamer identities, more specifically “Baby Boomer Gamers”. Other identity concepts may address game involvement or playing styles, such as power gamers (Taylor, 2003; Malone, 2009), who basically play to be the best and most efficient. Finally, Stein, Mitgutsch, & Consalvo (2013) discuss players of sports video games as sports gamers in relation to their overall media usage and general sports preferences, demonstrating an identification approach related to the genre of game played.

However, all of the above categorizations are oriented towards one-dimensional attributes (gender, age, gaming habits like playing time, play patterns, game involvement or game preferences). Gamer identities may thus be interpreted through characteristics limited to a selected specific perspective, and the criteria required to call one a gamer becomes difficult to define. Is someone a gamer when he/she plays games, certain types of games or a certain amount of games? These questions answered may leave out perspectives on how the individual perceives, conceptualizes and identifies him-/herself as a gamer (Shaw, 2012). As Shaw (2012, 2013) and Kowert (2014) argue, labeling someone a *gamer* only because he/she plays digital games does not come up to the contextualized social interactions and processes of self-reflection that shape the gamer identity. As found by De Grove, Courtois & Van Looy (2015), play frequency is a highly important predictor of self-categorization as a gamer, but yet can not be seen as a stand-alone factor independent from relating contexts of social group identification. As we have discussed, connections to social structures like communities, societal processes like the public discourse and, not least, the media need to be considered. Eklund (2013; 2014a; 2014b) address socio-structural elements that shape these processes in virtual game spaces and gameplay contexts by focusing on aspects of social gameplay and social grouping among MMOG players. Social interactions and temporary group formations in online in-game spaces require the players to willingly put a certain amount of social effort into engaging with others. If these social costs are perceived too high or if social norms among the players and a game’s mechanics do not suffice to sanction social non-conformity, players’ investment in the virtual social situation will likely be low (Eklund & Johansson, 2013). This indicates the importance of willingness to engage in social interactions for group formation processes among gamers. In the specific case of

digital gaming, social grouping is also a question of preferences about who to game with. Social gaming might be preferred among family members, friends or strangers and can also be subject to societal variables such as occupation, education, or class (Eklund, 2014a). However, regardless of who one decides to play with, gaming with others becomes social as it centers around shared experiences and actions, including the possibility of meeting another person in-game (Eklund, 2014b). Due to the social nature of these spaces, gamers often join online in-game groups like guilds whose members may share similar personal characteristics as themselves in out-of-game (offline) contexts (ibid.).

While these aspects do not describe how players or gamers define themselves, they do illustrate the variety of possible factors that premise the formation of social groups in virtual in-game contexts, framed by out-of-game situations of actual gameplay (e.g. playing with friends and family).

According to Shaw (2010), the question of the existence of a gamer culture evokes the need for discussing how it is implemented in or set apart from other cultural senses. She points to the importance of a cultural studies oriented gaming research, since games “are played by many if not all ages, genders, sexualities, races, religions, and nationalities” (p. 416). The notion of gendered gaming is taken into account by several intersectional works addressing the shift in the historically grown, formerly male shaped gaming culture, including articles by Cassell & Jenkins (1998) and Kafai, Heeter, Denner & Sun (2008).³ Research by Vermeulen, Van Looy, De Grove & Courtois (2011) indicates that gender differences in game design preferences may diminish due to similar interests and experience. However, as indicated by Ratan, Taylor, Hogan, Kennedy & Williams (2015), the social climate during gameplay may restrain female players’ enjoyment of and confidence in an online game. The researchers argue that female players of *League of Legends* were likely hindered from gaining confidence or could have adopted the feeling of not belonging in the game (or mainly playing supportive roles) due to a hostile social climate and the stereotype that the game is not meant for women. This, again, points to the importance of regarding the sociocultural contexts aside from a one-dimensional focus on demographics in researching the gender gap in gaming.

However, the importance of demographic attributes still needs to be taken into account. As a part of identity concepts and social connotations, they may still influence identification as a gamer. Negative connotations relating to gamer demographics, such as stereotypes, may constrict processes of identification as a gamer and have an impact on how the game industry constructs the market along these connotations (Shaw, 2012). In this context, it is important to consider that gamer identities, in turn, relate to this industry to a degree, as they are connected to entertainment media. They are likely not only influenced by the public discourse, but by technological progress and the communities’ notion of game structures. As such, gamer identities might change substantially along with changes and development of the gaming industry. The way how individuals, who may consider themselves gamers, relate to the market state, also shapes a social context for understanding gamer identities in between the discourse of self-reflection and society.

Moving forward: A proposed model of gamer identification

The lack of consensus among the academic community is particularly troubling as it makes it impossible to design and interpret research among such a population. In an attempt to generate a better understanding of gamers and the identity processes that are related to identifying as a gamer in both virtual and non-virtual contexts, we propose a new model of gamer identification. This model is the first to consider the potential overlap of the gamer identity between the physical (out-of-game) world and virtual (in-game) worlds. As seen in Figure 1, there are three levels of the gamer identity being proposed here: personal identity, group identity and virtual (group) identity. Together, they form an integrated identification model.

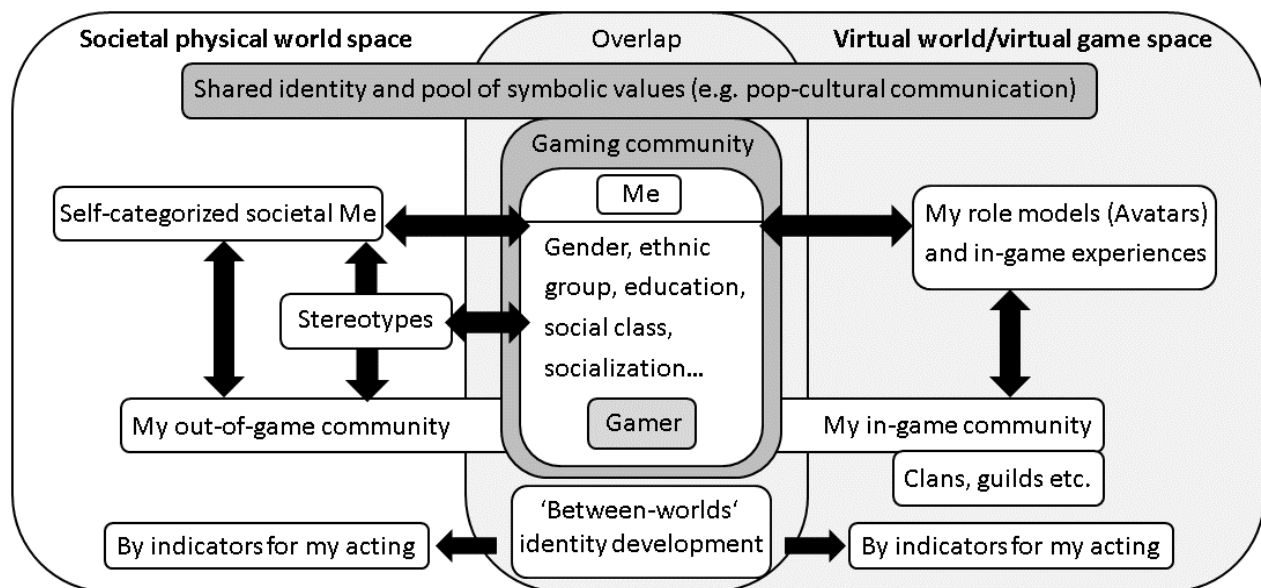


Figure 1: A model of integrated gamer identity

The individual (depicted as *Me*, see Figure 1) with his/her personal background (consisting of socio-demographic, identity-related attributes such as gender, ethnic group, education, social class and overall socialization) and his/her self-identification as a gamer are framed by a perceived membership in a gaming community. This community functions as a social group by sharing identity aspects, for instance through referring to a set of symbolic objects that hold the group's values. The gaming community itself is situated in the overlap between the physical and the virtual world: on one hand, the gamer is part of collaborative organized in-game communities such as guilds or clans; on the other hand, the gamer is in contact with an out-of-game community existing beyond the game (e.g. his/her friends and peer-group members, known through mediatized interpersonal interaction). The virtual gaming community can leap into the physical space by use of networking technology or the possibility of interpersonal relationship building, thus becoming one with the out-of-game community. Vice versa, it can be assumed that members of the gamer's out-of-game community may also be invited into the in-game community.

The gamer's self-categorization in the societal out-of-game space relates to the social environment and the public. The gamer might define him-/herself in relation to elements of this environment. Both the gamer's societal self-categorization and out-of-game community relate to and influence each other, shaping the perception of the gamer's self within society. Stereotypes, among other things transmitted by media, influence identification processes of the gamer's self, the out-of-game community and the gaming community. Awareness of stereotypes might, for instance, lead to identifying oneself or a group in contrast to these or attributing the stereotypes to others rather than to oneself.

In-game, the gamer's identity corresponds with his/her virtual representations embodied by the avatar. Creation of avatars allows for testing out secondary identities and role models in the virtual game context. Those role models again relate to the gamer's in-game community, for they influence the gamer's position within the virtual community and his/her representation amongst other players in the in-game world. The attributes of the personal background relate to both the individual's societal self-categorization and his/her interactions within the virtual space. As a result of said aspects, we argue that the social identity of gamers is overall developed through 'between-worlds' (in-game/out-of-game) processes which are determined by the gamer's (inter)acting in societal physical and virtual spaces.

The model's limitation is that – considering the virtual space – it mainly focusses on digital games that allow for online multiplayer gaming and identity construction through character creation. As stated above, the model's virtual component may be more applicable for certain types of games, such as MMORPGs. However, while certain games may not allow for identity creation, they still may allow for role-taking. For example, in the strategy game *Civilization V*, the player takes up the role of an emperor or head of state leading his/her nation through history. Additional research is needed to better understand how games without character creation can potentially contribute to identification processes beyond perceiving these games as leisure activity (Eklund, 2014b).

The proposed model is also limited in its ability to define the gamer as a fixed term. This is due to the understanding that identities are constantly evolving and never become unified (Hall, 1996). Hence, even among self-defined gamers there will likely be different notions about what it means to be a gamer. Instead, the current model helps to understand how the individual may construct his/her self-identification as a gamer through interplay of societal dimensions. This allows for further exploring how digital games and gaming influence the daily life of people, who link personal importance to gaming, perceiving it to be more than 'just a hobby' and valuably connected to their personal and social self-being.

While the dimensions of the model allow us to approach contexts of social influences on how the individual positions him-/herself as a gamer toward different socialization agents (such as family, peer-group, educational institutions and media), additional research is needed to understand the meaning of the gamer identity at different points of people's lives. For example, exploring the development of the gamer identity throughout consecutive age phases may contribute to the understanding of how gaming and games are tied to socialization and the development of societal and media competences. This may also contribute to understanding how

gaming-related identification processes are constructed along the model's dimensions as a part of people's personal biographies.

By conceptualizing the gamer identity as a multi-faceted and multi-tiered identity process, rather than defining gamers by static characteristics like play patterns and categorizing people who play video games and people who do not, we will begin to understand the importance of this medium and its related identity concepts in society and what position it holds in people's lives.

Conclusions

The 'gamer' has grown to become a staple in our everyday jargon, news media, and a common feature in television programs, web series, and movies. However, the term gamer is far more than simply an individual who plays video games, as it refers to a multi-faceted social identity that spans personal, social, and virtual contexts. The gamer identity is somewhat unique in this sense as it is part of both virtual and physical communities and by extending beyond the gaming spaces and into one's everyday life. Relating to the individual social environment, the gamer is not a static concept but rather develops through societal interaction according to or contrasting with this environment. Through a consideration for the multiple influences on gamer identity and cultures, we now have a better understanding of what makes digital games a part of people's life and how they relate to gaming as an activity. These constantly evolving societal processes beyond actual gameplay will continue to grow in importance as gaming continues to morph into a staple of everyday life.

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¹ See Geisler (2009) for a broader discussion of clans, guilds and game families as a part of social processes in gaming communities.

² For a more detailed discussion of social identity see Tajfel (1970, 1974, 1982); Tajfel & Turner (1979); Turner (1984).

³ Relating to this aspect and for a broader discussion of research on digital games and gendered gaming culture see Jansz, Avis & Vosmeer (2010); see also Shaw (2012, 2013, 2015); Ratan et al. (2015).