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<center>Identity Building Within the Gaming Space</center>

1. Introduction

The concept of identity is dynamic and multifaceted, encompassing the intricate exchange between individual self-perception, social interactions, and cultural influences within the broader societal context. It is not a fixed construct, but rather a fluid and evolving aspect of human existence. Subcultures, or groups within a larger culture, can have a significant influence on identity formation. The gaming community is no different. It is a community of individuals with a common interest in playing video games, a rich and diverse subculture that has evolved alongside the video game industry itself. Many aspects of the gaming subculture are worth studying on a sociological level as they can provide valuable insights into the intersection of technology, identity, community, and cultural dynamics in modern-day society. This research will focus on the themes of identity and self-perception, social interactions, and psychological aspects of gaming.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Gender Dynamics and Representation

Despite the Entertainment Software Association's reporting in 2019 that female gamers account for nearly half of the gaming community (ESA, 2019), sexism continues to be a deep-seated issue in the gaming community as well as the industry at large. Women in gaming

are often treated as a novelty, akin to a "consumption unicorn," where the subculture does not expect women to be gamers. This leads to skepticism and awe when encountering a woman who plays games, reinforcing the tokenistic perception of women as rare within the gaming community (Drenten et al., 2022). Gender is found to be strongly correlated with the "gamer" identity, with straight cis men being far more likely to identify as a gamer than women, transgender, or genderqueer individuals (Shaw, 2010; Allen, 2023). One attributing factor as to why sexism tends to be an issue within the gaming community is that women tend to get poor representation in games overall, if they get any representation at all. It wasn't until the 2010s that we started to see a shift in the depictions of women in triple-A games, introducing characters like Ellie in The Last of Us, Aloy in Horizon Zero Dawn and Elizabeth in Bioshock Infinite. These characters reflect agency and strength without being overtly sexualized, signaling a change in the industry (Allen, 2023). Grace (2020) argues that representation in games is essential as it is about "confirming, maintaining, or advancing the power and identity of a community of players." In other words, representation in games helps tie players of differing identities to the experience and helps to build them up in some way.

2.2 Online Multiplayer Interactions and Community Dynamics

Another essential aspect of identity building within the gaming subculture is the communities that are built through online multiplayer interactions. In an ethnographic study done by Chee, Vieta, and Smith (2006) that focuses on players of the MMORPG EverQuest, it is found that there is a point at which a game is no longer "just a game" but a way of life for some. This is particularly the case for MMORPGs such as EverQuest, where the players build genuine relationships with others within the community built within the game. The world created in virtual reality becomes almost indistinguishable from real life. According to the study, "the

EverQuest world is an "outer world" of work. The world of flesh-and-blood engages the self with the other, just like EverQuest players engage with others and "gear into" the things of the world on EverQuest and its communally-created realities" (Chee et al., 2006). In other words, players' engagement with others and immersion in the game's realities mirror the interactions and experiences they have in the physical world. It suggests that the game world becomes a meaningful and socially interactive space where players invest themselves and create shared experiences. It is also argued that MMORPGs and MMORPG communities are "distinct social referents" and that MMORPGs possess "unique, attractive, and meaningful identities, which enable them to become valid targets for identification among players" (Badrinarayanan et al., 2015).

2.3 Psychological Aspects of Gaming and Ideal Self-Perception

Video games are seen as environments that allow individuals to adopt novel identities and explore interactive narratives. Video games allow players to experience idealized attributes and satisfactions that might be challenging to access in everyday life. Players can act in ways that align with their idealized views of the self within the game context (Przybylski et al., 2011). In other words, video games serve as a unique and motivating space for identity exploration, allowing individuals to bridge the gap between their actual and ideal selves, ultimately contributing to enhanced well-being and attachment to gaming environments. Unlike traditional media, video games offer an interactive environment where players observe and actively participate in the game world and take on specific roles (e.g., adventurer, hero, animal, etc.,) that shape the properties and course of the game. Players are not mere observers but controllers and contributors to the unfolding narrative, filling in the role offered to them and shaping the properties and course of the game. Grace (2020) argues that games have the power to change

people's minds in a sense. She states, "The idea is simple: If a player can do something in a game, they may be able to do it outside the game. This may be linked to solving a problem, practicing a skill, or understanding something differently" (Grace, 2020, p. 93).

RQ1: How do gamers perceive and construct their identity within the gaming community?

RQ2: To what extent does the identification with in-game avatars or characters impact a gamer's sense of self?

RQ3: What role do social interactions within gaming communities play in shaping gamers' self-identity?

RQ4: How do narrative elements in games contribute to emotional engagement and identification, influencing players' perceptions of themselves?

3. Methods

The media we consume profoundly impacts our lives, significantly influencing how we perceive ourselves, interact with others, and engage with the world around us. Video games, in particular, are interactive and immersive forms of media, and the experiences people have with them go beyond entertainment by actively shaping our cognitive and emotional responses. The present study aims to explore identity building within the gaming subculture and their lives aside from the subculture, explicitly focusing on the psychological processes of identification, self-perception, and social interactions among gamers. To do this, I will conduct an in-depth interview of gamers with a range of different identities, as I want to have a maximized level of diversity in participant demographics, including age, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location. This can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how gaming habits and identity vary across different groups. In addition to demographic diversity, I also want to have a high level of diversity in gaming habits, so I chose participants who engage in various gaming habits,

including different genres, platforms, and levels of involvement within the broader gaming community. This diversity will help capture a wider spectrum of experiences to draw upon. To maximize the number of participants, I will use a variety of methods to recruit interested parties, including finding gamers through online gaming communities such as Reddit, Twitch, and Discord, putting up recruitment flyers in locations across local colleges and universities - particularly ones that have an e-sports team presence or any gaming-centric clubs, and also going to a few different gaming events and conventions to connect with gamers in person. This study will take place over the course of about a year, so I'll be able to plan to attend as many of the relevant events as possible, including, but not limited to, PAX East in March, Lvl Up Expo in April, Too Many Games in June, and PAX West in August.

To simplify the study, I will focus only on adult gamers. The interview consists of twelve open-ended questions across four categories: Demographic Information, Identity and self-perception, social interactions, and psychological aspects. The interviews will be done in a variety of ways, depending on what is most convenient for the participant. The options that will be given are in-person interviews, Zoom, and phone interviews. The participants will be able to share as much or as little as they feel comfortable sharing, and for the sake of privacy, pseudonyms will be used.

3.1 The Interview: Demographic Information

The purpose of this interview segment is to establish a baseline understanding of participants and their gaming habits and preferences, contextualize their experiences, and explore the significance of the gamer identity and its role in shaping participants' overall self-perception. [1] Tell me about yourself outside of the gaming context. (Name, age, where you're from, gender identity and sexuality if you're comfortable with sharing that information)

[2] Can you share some details about your gaming background, including the genres, platforms, and specific games you play most frequently?

[3] How do you define your identity within the gaming community? How important is your gamer identity to you?

3.2 Identity and Self-Perception

Despite the reported near-equal presence of female gamers, the gaming community still struggles with deep-rooted sexism, both within the community and the industry. Grace (2020) argues that representation in games is vital for confirming, maintaining, or advancing the power and identity of a community of players. This implies that the portrayal of diverse identities in games is crucial for the self-perception and identity formation of individuals within the gaming subculture. In a content analysis of Horizon Zero Dawn and Horizon Forbidden West, Allen (2023) argues that representation of strong, empowered female characters like Aloy can positively impact players, combating the adverse effects of hypersexualized media and contributing to a more inclusive gaming environment. Aloy's success in the game is not defined by or in spite of her gender but is attributed to her abilities. This challenges traditional gender stereotypes in gaming, presenting a strong, successful female character without constantly emphasizing her gender.

Cote & Mejeur's (2017) content analysis of the 2007 gamer-oriented web series "The Guild" looks at the characters and situations within the series and applies it to the real-life gaming community, parallels between the struggles and dynamics of the characters within the show and broader issues within gaming culture. Concepts like "cruel optimism" are used to analyze how the promises of identity and belonging within the gaming subculture can become unattainable due to the idealization of certain norms, such as inequality, competition, and

domination. The discussion extends to real-world events like #GamerGate, emphasizing that the issues presented in the series reflect and can be connected to actual challenges and controversies within gaming communities.

The previous research has a heavy focus on sexism in the gaming spaces. While that is important, I am also interested in how identities are built within the subculture in the face of all the stereotypes and misconceptions. What role do the community and the games themselves play in building a gamer's identity? This category consists of three questions that attempt to encapsulate how identity and self-perception are shaped by the games that gamers play, as well as the community they surround themselves with. The questions I chose are meant to uncover instances of strong identification to understand the depth and nature of these connections and investigate the dynamics between in-game and real-life identities, exploring potential discrepancies and motivations. Additionally, it should be able to help understand the potential impact of gaming on participants' broader sense of self and how gaming experiences may extend beyond the virtual realm.

[1] Have you ever experienced a strong sense of connection with a character or avatar in a game? Can you describe that experience?

[2] Do you find that your in-game identity is different from your identity in real life? How and why?

[3] In what ways do you think your gaming experiences contribute to shaping your identity and self-perception outside of the gaming context?

3.3 Social Interactions

Gaming is a social hobby in many ways. The virtual environment in online games becomes a socially interactive space where players invest themselves, creating shared

experiences akin to those in the real world. MMORPGs and their communities are considered "distinct social referents," implying that they provide unique, attractive, and meaningful identities, making them valid targets for identification among players (Chee et al, 2006). The immersive nature of video games and the creation of meaningful identities and relationships within the virtual spaces make them noteworthy subjects for research on the gaming subculture's social dynamics.

The past research on social interactions in the gaming space has a heavy focus on MMORPGs and online multiplayer interactions. I want to take the opportunity in my research to look at the community as a whole, rather than focusing solely on gamers who play a particular genre of games. This part of the interview consists of three questions and is meant to help get an understanding of how the social aspects of gaming intertwine with the gamers' identity and build upon it. Is there an inherent difference between the identities of people who play primarily multiplayer games or people who err on the side of single-player experiences? These questions are designed to hopefully understand the social dimension of gaming and its influence on participants' enjoyment and engagement, examine the depth of social connections formed through gaming and their potential impact on participants' broader social lives, and explore the emotional dimension of social interactions within gaming, emphasizing their possible psychosocial effects.

[1] How do social interactions within games contribute to your overall gaming experience?

[2] Have you developed meaningful relationships with other gamers, either within or outside the gaming environment? How would you describe it?

[3] Can you recall a specific instance where your interactions with other gamers had a notable impact on your sense of self?

3.4 Psychological Aspects

In gaming, there's an appeal in stepping into a character or role that is entirely different from who you actually are. Przybylski et al. (2012) discuss the idea of the convergence of the ideal self and the in-game self. This idea stems from the psychological theory of ideal self vs actual self, which looks at the discrepancy between who a person is (actual self) and who they want to be (ideal self). The study shows that individuals are motivated to engage in gaming, at least in part, by the opportunity to experience ideal aspects of themselves within the virtual environment of video games. It sheds light on the cultural significance of video gaming as a form of entertainment. Understanding why individuals are drawn to gaming, especially in relation to their ideal selves, contributes to discussions on cultural preferences and the evolving role of technology in leisure activities. Video games often involve the creation of virtual identities. The study's findings about players seeking to embody their ideal selves in-game speak to the role of virtual communities and how social identity extends into digital spaces.

Przybylski et al.'s study, in particular, is excellent, and I want my own study to build upon it. Their study happens to be quantitative in nature, but I want to do a qualitative twist on it so that I can focus on individual experiences without turning them into a statistic. With all that in mind, the three questions in this segment of the interview would aim to investigate the role-playing aspect and its connection to the player's idealized self and explore how gamers use the gaming environment to enact aspects of their identity they might idealize and explore the instances of solid identification to understand the emotional and cognitive impact and examine how these identified moments might influence the player's mindset beyond the gaming context. The final question in this segment will help explore the social dynamics within the gaming

subculture and their influence on self-perception and understand how communal interactions contribute to the construction of the participant's identity.

[1] In your gaming experiences, do you find that you take on different roles or characteristics within the game that align with your idealized version of yourself?

[2] Can you describe a moment in a game where you strongly identified with the character or avatar you were controlling? How did that affect your thoughts or emotions during and after gameplay?

[3] Do you feel that your interactions with other gamers, either in-game or within gaming communities, impact how you perceive yourself?

4. Conclusion

In exploring the connections between gaming, identity, and sociocultural dynamics, this research proposal seeks to explore the multifaceted world of the gaming subculture. The diverse and evolving nature of identity formation within the gaming community provides a rich landscape for sociological exploration. Understanding how individuals perceive and construct their identities becomes increasingly crucial as the gaming industry grows and diversifies. The previous research provides a solid foundation for the study, emphasizing the persistent challenges of representation in gaming, the transformative power of online multiplayer interactions, and the psychological aspects of gaming that allow individuals to bridge the gap between their actual and ideal selves. These themes lay the groundwork for my research questions, which aim to unravel the intricacies of identity building within the gaming subculture.

The proposed methods, including in-depth interviews with a diverse range of adult gamers which aim to capture a comprehensive overview of identity building within the gaming subculture. By considering demographics, gaming habits, and personal experiences, I hope to

uncover the nuances of how individuals define themselves within and beyond the gaming context. The interview questions, strategically crafted across four categories, will guide participants in sharing their stories, allowing me to explore the profound connections between gamers and their in-game avatars, the social dynamics shaping their identities, and the psychological dimensions that influence their self-perception. As I embark on this research journey, I anticipate uncovering narratives that extend far beyond the pixels on a screen. The gaming subculture, often stereotyped and misunderstood, can potentially emerge as a vibrant space where individuals navigate the complexities of identity in a digital landscape. By uncovering the experiences of gamers, I hope to contribute valuable insights into the broader conversation about the intersection of technology, culture, and selfhood.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

Demographic Information:

1. Tell me about yourself outside of the gaming context. (Name, age, where you're from, gender identity and sexuality if you're comfortable with sharing that information)

2. Can you share some details about your gaming background, including the genres, platforms, and specific games you play most frequently?

3. How do you define your identity within the gaming community? How important is your gamer identity to you?

Identity and Self-Perception:

1. Have you ever experienced a strong sense of connection with a character or avatar in a game? Can you describe that experience?

2. Do you find that your in-game identity is different from your identity in real life? How and why?

3. In what ways do you think your gaming experiences contribute to shaping your identity and self-perception outside of the gaming context?

Social Interactions:

1. How do social interactions within games contribute to your overall gaming experience?

2. Have you developed meaningful relationships with other gamers, either within or outside the gaming environment? How would you describe it?

3. Can you recall a specific instance where your interactions with other gamers had a notable impact on your sense of self?

Psychological:

1. In your gaming experiences, do you find that you take on different roles or characteristics within the game that align with your idealized version of yourself?

2. Can you describe a moment in a game where you strongly identified with the character or avatar you were controlling? How did that affect your thoughts or emotions during and after gameplay?

3. Do you feel that your interactions with other gamers, either in-game or within gaming communities, impact how you perceive yourself?

Appendix B: Face Sheet

Interviewee Information:

- Participant Name
- Participant Psuedonym::
- Date of Interview:
- Age:
- Gender Identity:
- Sexuality:
- Ethnicity:
- Geographic Location:

Contact Information:

- Email:
- Phone:

Gaming Background:

- Primary Gaming Platform(s):
- Favorite Gaming Genres:
- Top Three Favorite Games:
- Level of Involvement in Gaming Communities (e.g., forums, social media groups):

Interview Logistics:

- Interview Format (In-person, Zoom, Phone):
- Interview Duration:
- Location (if in-person):