Hyperidentities within MMORPGs: an analysis of social interaction in MMORPGs and their effects on their players.

One of the most academically ignored forms of media in recent years has been video games. With a huge dominance of film studies and television studies, the concept of video games as anything more than a trivial pastime has been mostly overlooked. However, there has been a very gradual shift of taking video games seriously as both an art form and as something worthy of academic analysis. This has been due to the mainstream popularisation of the media which has caused an increase in the number of people playing all types of video game. This study aims to concentrate on the MMORPG genre, Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (which will from now on be referred to as MMORPGs and be defined later on). It aims to look at the development of the genre into mainstream popularity and to examine the concept of a hyperidentity being used within them, possibly altering the identity of the player ‘outside’ of the game. With games such as these even becoming profitable for players, it is an interesting phenomenon to analyse as it is evidently becoming a more important part of ‘real life’ to an increasing number of players.

‘If Pacman had affected us as kids we'd be running around in dark rooms, munching pills and listening to repetitive music.’

(Marcus Brigstocke, 1999)
This analysis will be done by contrasting Baudrillard’s vision of hyperreality with the ‘reality’ that some MMORPGs produce for its players to see if his vision is similar to the MMORPG ‘world’ and whether it does affect players ‘outside’ of the game.

The term hyperidentity comes from the Polish academic author Miroslaw Filiciak who has conducted a large amount of research and analysis regarding online gaming and their communicational aspects as well as the post-modern theories that can be linked to this such as the work conducted by Baudrillard and Castells. These terms and theories are crucial throughout the dissertation to contrast against the virtual worlds MMORPGs create. The term hyperreality, which hyperidentity is descended from, was conceived by the post-modern theorist Jean Baudrillard. He states that hyperreality means that it is no longer possible, in a media-saturated world, to distinguish between what is real and what is not. Hyperreality, therefore, is a situation in which nothing and everything is ‘real’; it is a situation in which we have lost the ability to distinguish reality and fiction. There will be a look at Castells due to his idea that in a network society (such as the ones created within MMORPGs) our identity is defined by our relation to the internet instead of the family, the clan, the tribe or nation, a dramatic shift from typical sociological attitudes regarding societies. There will also be some brief analysis of psychological theory such as Jung’s discussion on persona, the mask being an integral part of our personality and shaped according to the need to match it with cultural requirements, such as the shift in cultures when they are online based. Primarily in the early stages of this discussion there will be an examination of the history and background of the genre, the economics behind it as

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1 See Filiciak’s chapter ‘Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games’ in The Video Game Theory Reader, eds. M.J.P Wolf and B. Perron (New York: Routledge)

well as the online communities it has created. Subsequent chapters will be divided so as to discuss my case studies, World of Warcraft and Everquest, while also looking at such concepts as gold ‘farming’ (whereby people play the game purely to make game money which they can then sell for real money) and the idea of ‘buying’ your identity (purchasing ready made characters) and of ‘losing’ your identity when a MMORPG shuts down. There will also be a brief look at some unique examples such as Entropia Universe (formerly known as Project Entropia) which is a free MMORPG with a real life cash economy meaning that there have been incidents where people have made large sums of real money from the game, as well as examples of real life crime caused by events online.

There will also be a look at the various pieces of evidence to suggest what motivations players have to continue playing such as the research conducted by Nick Yee\(^3\). There will be an examination of how important the player’s identity in game is in contrast to their ‘real life’ identity and whether the idea of a hyperidentity is correct and that some players find this personality more important to them than their ‘real’ one in terms of development. There will also be a look at the relationships formed through these identities to the point that some people have even formed romantic attachments to others through virtual weddings and marriages. Finally there will be analysis of Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality and how this links into the concept of hyperidentity, it will also look at to what extent consumerism has spread to the computer screen in MMORPGs and the possible fetishisation of the items in the games through the ability to sell them on for real money and the fact they become more important than real items to some players.

\(^3\) http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/
Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing games are a fast growing phenomenon particularly in the world of PC Gaming. While it is hard to gauge accurately the number of players for all MMORPGs, if one looks at the statistics from last year regarding one of the most popular MMORPGs, World of Warcraft, it is noticed that this one game alone had five million subscribers in December 2005\(^4\) with this number most likely to increase throughout 2006 with the launch of a new expansion pack for the game entitled ‘Burning Crusade’. Bearing in mind that there are a large number of different MMORPGs available now (and with around seventeen mainstream MMOs in production at the moment\(^5\)) there is an extremely large number of people playing these games. In countries such as South Korea there are even police departments dedicated to online crimes due to the impact that online gaming has had on people there. The games themselves follow a similar theme in the method in which you play them. Often, and in the case of the most popular ones: World of Warcraft and Everquest, they are set in a fantasy style world in which strange creatures live such as elves, dwarves and trolls. The player begins the game by choosing a character. They choose what race the character is and then what ‘class’ they are such as fighter, scout, mage/magician or one of the less familiar classes such as necromancer or shaman. This will be discussed in more detail later on in the case study of World of Warcraft. After this has been completed, the player then creates a name for their chosen ‘persona’ within the game and the game commences. They are then freely able to run around an entire ‘world’ created within the game and are allowed to do pretty much anything that they wish to do. This is perhaps pivotal to their appeal, the ability to do whatever they want as their alter-ego within the game.

\(^4\) [http://www.blizzard.co.uk/press/051219.shtml](http://www.blizzard.co.uk/press/051219.shtml)

However while the modern interpretation of the MMORPG has a number of similarities to the first MMORPGs, they are a far cry from its origins in the 1970s. This decade saw the simultaneous rise of three distinct sub genres of role-playing games: non-graphical online MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) which were particularly popular at Universities, text-based computer games such as Adventure, Dungeon and Zork, and finally pen and paper role-playing games like Dungeons and Dragons. However the first actual MMORPG (At least considered massive by 1980s standards) was released in 1984 by the American games developers Kelton Flinn and John Taylor. Around this time there was also the emergence of the first online communities such as the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link) documented in great depth by Howard Rheingold. These communities were arguably the beginning of MMORPGs; it was a small step towards acting out a different identity online to your ‘real life’ identity. However all of these features needed to be implemented in one package to get anywhere near the MMORPG that we know today. Habitat was arguably the first true graphical online virtual world where one could play out actions under their chosen avatar. It was created in 1985 by Randy Farmer and Chip Morningstar of LucasFilm. It supported more than 16 players which, although a very small number for modern MMORPGs, was quite impressive for the Commodore 64 home computers used at the time. It was a pre-cursor to such companies as Sierra Online and Genie which also offered persistent worlds in the late 1980s. By 1993 QuantumLink, the online service that enabled people to play Habitat, was taken over

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6 Also sometimes referred to as Multi-User Dimension or Domain.

by America On-Line (AOL)\(^8\) and a move was made towards creating games like these on the PC rather than the lower specification Commodore 64.

There are conflicting records as to what was the next major MMOG (Massively Multiplayer Online Game) to be released, mainly due to differing interpretations of what constitutes as ‘Massively Multiplayer’. The two titles vying for the title of first graphical MMOPG were Neverwinter Nights\(^9\) which went live on AOL in 1991 and Meridian 59 in 1996 which Gamespy\(^10\) deemed as the next major step for MMOGs.

Neverwinter Nights was certainly the first graphical MMORG which must have had an effect on future games such as Meridian 59. By today’s standards Neverwinter Nights looks relatively basic:

![Game Image]

but at the time was a great step forward for online gaming. It originally cost $6 US Dollars an hour to play but as the years progressed, the fee dropped and subscriptions for both Neverwinter Nights and AOL increased a huge deal. Due to this, the game was given a much needed upgrade in 1992 enabling a higher capacity of players on the servers, it went from 50 in 1991 to 500 in 1995. A number of other game related

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\(^8\) http://www.well.com/user/hlr/vcbook/vcbook6.html
\(^9\) http://www.bladekeep.com/hwn/
\(^10\) http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week1/index.shtml
upgrades were implemented but sadly in 1997 AOL decided to cease development of the game and closed the servers. This, however, did provoke a large demonstration of ‘player power’ with a number of protests carried out and petitions organised by ex players who had devoted a lot of time and money to the community. There were even some news conferences with local television stations in the US and articles in game magazines. Nevertheless, this was all in vain due to copyright issues and AOL’s lack of desire to invest anymore time into the venture. The main problem hindering the growth of MMORPGs was the fact that commercial usage of the internet was limited by NSFNET acceptable usage policies which was the main governmental control in the USA. In 1995 however, it was dismantled and replaced with a commercial internet backbone, much like the one that exists today. This enabled a number of small MMORPGs to be developed and become popular, culminating in the first mainstream MMORPG, Ultima Online, being released in 1997. Ultima Online featured a flat rate monthly subscription fee of $10 a month, unlike earlier MMORPGs which charged by the hour, this encouraged a broader range of games players to be interested rather than the ‘hardcore’ gamers who did not mind paying by the hour.

Ultima Online changed the future of MMORPGs and set a new precedence for any other online game that aimed to achieve as much as Ultima Online. It was a pioneer in its general attitude to the genre, both by offering a flat rate monthly subscription fee and through its use of creating a ‘proper’ massively multiplayer community for its players. It is offered in six languages and is played in more than 100 countries located in every time zone. It is also currently the longest running online subscription based
game in history.\textsuperscript{11} When Ultima Online was launched in 1997 its graphics were surprisingly detailed for the time:

![Game Screenshot](image.png)

Obviously for 2006 they look quite dated but they still retain a certain charm which has encouraged new players to sign up to this historic MMORPG. For a seven year old game, it may not have the large subscription base of a newer game such as World of Warcraft but it still manages to have around 150,000 subscribers and a 1.7% market share amongst other MMORPGs as of June 2005.\textsuperscript{12} The game has encountered a small revival thanks to the usage of emulation software for the servers. This emulation software enables keen fans of the game to create their own servers thus keeping the game alive and independent of the game developer’s controls. Although a

\textsuperscript{12} http://www.mmogchart.com/Chart7.html
grey area legally, it has become quite a phenomenon with a large number of different emulators available for the game, all free and open source, enabling others to edit the files and create their own server emulator programs. Some servers are even known to rival the official servers in terms of size and activity. Wolfpack (http://www.wpdev.org/) being one of the most prominent Ultima Online server emulators available. These types of software are known about by Origin (the game developer) and Electronic Arts (the game distributor) but are largely ignored these days, presumably because at least it keeps the game alive in some form, and may even generate some sales for Origin and Electronic Arts with a copy of the game being needed to run on emulated servers. It is impossible to state accurately just how many people play Ultima Online on unofficial servers but looking at the large number of websites devoted to the matter, it seems reasonable to assume that there are still a great many enthusiasts playing the game in this way. This game is also a classic example of ‘player power’, the players themselves have kept the game going purely through their own determination and software development with little or no involvement from the original game developers.

Around the same time as the release of Ultima Online in the West, the Eastern game developers in South Korea came up with Lineage, a game which would shortly become somewhat infamous for the levels of obsession it could bring about in its players to the extent of real life crimes being committed in ‘aid’ of the game. The game itself was reported to have around 520 million different accounts by 2004, obviously with multiple accounts owned by an individual. It might seem strange for people to own a number of different accounts but it has a very logical (and profitable)

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13 http://joongangdaily.joins.com/200405/20/200405202349190639900090609061.html and http://www.ncsoft.net/ir_down/other/Conference_Call_(1QFY04)ENG.pdf
meaning behind it. The rise in popularity of games such as Ultima Online in the West and Lineage in the East also led to a rise in people wanting to pay real money for virtual items and characters in the game. People saw this as a ‘quick’ way to advance in the game without actually having to devote time and effort to it. This trend has now led to a large number of websites dedicated to selling and buying virtual items and money in the game for real money. There are even some people whose main source of income is playing MMORPGs and selling items on for real money, as well as cases of ‘sweatshop’ style businesses in Eastern European countries providing a similar service, which will be looked at further on in this study.

The idea of selling virtual money was extended with the launch of Everquest and Dark Ages of Camelot in 1999 and 2001 respectively. Both of these games improved upon Ultima Online’s popularity and brought the genre much nearer to mainstream popularity. They are both also still played today by many players around the world with Everquest still boasting 300,000 subscribers. Both games also still have new expansion packs being released for them, providing new content and land for players to explore keeping the game fresh and new. Unlike ‘offline’ single player games, MMORPGs are often able to keep ‘fresh’, thanks to expansion packs, for a number of years even though they may be superseded by newer games when it comes to mainstream popularity. Obviously if someone wanted to devote so much time to a game, they would hate to load up the game one day and find the game servers simply gone so it is in the developers best interests to continue running the games for as long as they are financially viable. Everquest in particular has done well to continue for so many years, with a recent announcement that it is returning to its ‘roots’ by launching
a ‘progression’ server whereby the game starts as it was first started, with gradual launches of the expansion packs made since.\textsuperscript{14}

Finally, in the last few years, the current wave of modern MMORPGs, such as Eve Online, World of Warcraft, Everquest 2, RF Online and Guild Wars, has arrived with World of Warcraft being the most popular with around 5.5 million subscribers around the world as of January 2006\textsuperscript{15}. These games have successfully transgressed the mainstream barrier ensuring a much wider audience of people aware of these games. They are no longer seen as ‘geeky’ pastimes for people with no lives and are easily purchasable in all games stores. There are now even film tie ins with MMORPGs such as The Matrix Online, and soon to be Lord of The Rings Online, which shows an interesting overlap between forms of media with film distributors wanting to stretch their film license further. The following chapters will be examining Everquest and World of Warcraft in further depth as well as some other slightly more obscure, but more unique MMORPGs such as Entropia Universe and Second Life, MMORPGs with a real life cash economy meaning that there have been incidents where people have made large sums of real money from the game. The communities behind such games will also be looked at ranging from gold farming to online web-comics satirising the genre.

World of Warcraft was one of the most anticipated games of 2004 and 2005, having been in development for the previous 6 years. It was hailed as providing everything a MMORPG player would want and more. In reality it turned out to be a huge hit but

\textsuperscript{14} http://www.mmorpg.com/gamelist.cfm?loadNews=5189&fp=1024,768,1147002080749,20060507074120
\textsuperscript{15} http://www.blizzard.com/press/060119.shtml
still with its faults. It did however popularise the genre and encourage a number of people who wouldn’t typically play MMORPGs to sign up to this game due to its relatively simple gameplay that did not seem daunting to the casual player.

The game starts out very simply. It begins with the player choosing what server to play on, one can either do that manually (by deliberately choosing a certain server, so as to meet up with friends) or by answering a few simple questions, such as what language you speak, whether they want to play on a PvP server or not, and selecting the server that the game recommends. The player is then able to ‘create’ a character, or persona, for themselves on this server. They are given the option of choosing a gender for their character, a race and a ‘class’. In World of Warcraft the choice of race affects where they can travel. They are given the options of ‘Horde’ based races or ‘Alliance’. They are two separate warring factions within the game’s history and greatly affect what places the player can explore. The player is given eight races to choose from, Tauren, Orc, Troll or Undead for Horde based races; or Human, Night Elf, Dwarf or Gnome for Alliance based races.

\footnote{PvP servers are Player Versus Player servers whereby players can attack each other if they are opposite allegiance (i.e. Horde and Alliance). They are typically not recommended to new players due to their increased difficulty.}
The player is then given perhaps the most difficult decision of all: what class to choose to play as. This can greatly affect both their enjoyment of the game and the style in which they play the game. The nine choices open to the player are the healing based classes: druid, priest and shaman; the magic casters: mage and warlock; and the fighting classes: hunter, paladin, rogue and warrior. All nine of these classes have various strengths and weaknesses. On a basic level: healing and magic casters tend to be not as strong or as able to withstand a large amount of damage compared to the fighting classes. However classes such as the warrior are less able to play the game alone as efficiently as other classes such as hunter or shaman due to their lack of ability to heal themselves. This can greatly change the game dynamic as typically people who wish to play the game purely by themselves will go for the ‘soloing’
classes such as hunter, shaman or warlock; while those players who prefer to stick together in a group and play alongside others are more likely to go for supporting classes such as warrior or priest. A survey carried out by Nick Yee also determined that female players are more likely to play as priests, hunters and druids while male players are more likely to play as rogues, warriors and shamans.\textsuperscript{17} It is interesting to see that the stereotypical idea of women being carers and men being more aggressive is carried across from the real world to the virtual world, even when there is nothing restricting either gender from breaking this stereotype; they resort to sticking with their traditional views. There is also an analysis of the motivations behind why people choose the classes that they choose. Yee has determined that those who are most competitive typically choose the shaman or mage class, presumably because they are two of the most capable soloing classes available in the game. While those most interested in socialising a lot within the game typically chose the priest or paladin class, both support classes that often rely on groups to achieve their goals. Mages and paladins were the least sociable statistically. Another gender divide indicates that female players are more likely to choose the ‘cuter’ looking races such as gnome or night elf, while the male players are more likely to play as orcs or undead. The gender divide for night elves is particularly noticeable with around 34% of women choosing that race with only 21% of men doing the same thing.\textsuperscript{18}

The final option for a player is to choose their name, a deeply personal thing which ensures that the character is solely ‘theirs’ within the world that the game presents. Unlike other video games, MMORPGs enable the player to create their own character entirely from scratch and give it its own individual name, thus personalising the

\textsuperscript{17} http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001367.php
\textsuperscript{18} http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001368.php
experience and making the player feel more attached and emotionally involved with their character. This character name has even been known to extend to the ‘real world’ with players meeting up from around the country or the world and then calling each other by their in-game name rather than their ‘real’ name. Obviously this is sometimes circumvented as some players choose to name their character after themselves, i.e. Nic calling themselves Nik. This could be seen as extending their real life identity and personality onto the game, even down to the same name. Other players name themselves after a variety of different things, some people choose to name themselves after characters from film or television, such as Conan, while others are more creative and choose a name that just sounds ‘appropriate’ for the type of character they want to be, such as Haly. Some people may also ‘transfer’ their real life nickname into the game such as Gilly, a nickname acquired from a pronunciation of the surname Ramskill.¹⁹

Once the character has been created the game can be started. Each race begins in a different starting area of the ‘world’. These areas are created specifically with beginners in mind allowing the player to be guided through the basic processes of the game so that they are not overwhelmed by so many choices or endangered. Crucially, while it is an individual beginning, they begin at the same time as many other new players so the ability to work together in groups is made instantly available to them. In some cases it is vital to work together as a team due to some quests requiring a number of players together to successfully complete them.

¹⁹ All names come from personal experience of the games.
One other social form within the game is the possibility of ‘guilds’, organisations of
groups of like-minded players who band together to achieve large goals. Some of
these goals can require ‘raid’ sized forces of twenty or more players grouping together
to kill a dragon for example. These guilds are given names by the player who creates
the guild and a hierarchal structure of leaders and officers are elected to manage the
guild. Complex politics often play a large part in these guilds with many decisions
being made about what new members to recruit and how special items are distributed
amongst members. Guilds can become extremely complex due to these factors but
they also add great depth to the game for players involved in one. The role of being
either an officer or a leader of a guild can also make the game a much more serious
matter. As an anonymous quote from Nick Yee’s site\textsuperscript{20} states:

‘Leading a guild is very rewarding, watching it grow and thrive,
being respected by your members as a good leader. Politics and
folks leaving the game eventually ruins the experience. Overall it
was very fun, time consuming and an emotionally exhausting
experience. Not sure if I would do it again.’

(Anonymous, 2006)

It is possible, as a guild leader, to use a number of experiences from your ‘real’ life to
 teach you how to approach a situation in the game, this can also work in reverse and
teach one how to handle things in ‘real’ life from their experiences in game. Early on
in leadership it becomes quickly apparent that it is impossible to please everyone all
the time (as in real life). As all the players in a guild play the game differently, i.e.

\textsuperscript{20}http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001516.php
one player might level up extremely fast while another takes their time; it is difficult to balance such needs within a guild when the game is created to be so open ended for the individual. There is also the issue that all these players have to juggle responsibilities in the real world such as a job or family, as well as their responsibilities in the game, thus creating a double shift pattern akin to a woman in the workplace who is also forced to look after the children and cook once they return home. One problem which is unique to MMORPGs is that unlike groups in the workplace, these groups within guilds are not compromised of people from similar backgrounds or with similar experiences. A guild leader in a MMORPG has to lead people of widely varying ages with different levels of responsibility; some will still be at school while others will have children to take care of or stressful jobs to go to. The key to being a good guild leader involves being able to manage these different needs efficiently which sounds much more like a job than most games would seem to be. It also enables the person to learn a lot more about how they handle certain situations. There may also come times where a leader has to make a difficult decision where they must either punish or remove someone from the guild. All these various factors are both stressful yet also educate the person more about themselves and arguably change their personality to some degree, as all life experiences do. Nick Yee’s research has demonstrated this by showing that it has even enhanced some people’s potential in real life to gain promotions within their workplace:

‘Being a guild leader has effected my RL (Real Life) ability to lead people and stand up and do what is good and needs to be done. I have received numerous promotions at work into
leadership positions and I make almost 8 times more now than
when I started WoW last year.’ (Anonymous, 2006)\textsuperscript{21}

The relationships gained through becoming a leader within a game evidently can
affect more than just how the game is played, but also some elements of one’s real
life and identity. Perhaps a MMORPG could be used as a tool to improve teamwork
skills and leadership qualities.

Social networking on the whole plays a crucial part in MMORPGs with players
quickly realising that, as in real life, it is not necessarily your skills or talents that get
you places, but also who you know in the virtual world. Research on social
relationships has been conducted by a number of media commentators such as Nick
Yee, Mikael Jakobsson and Manuel Castells. Jakobsson and Taylor in their article
‘Social Networking in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games’\textsuperscript{22} liken the
social interaction and networking in MMORPGs to mafia connections within the TV
show ‘The Sopranos’. They use an example of Jakobsson beginning the game as a
‘newbie’ (new and inexperienced player) with Taylor guiding him through the basics
of the game. In doing so he gives him some improved items and introduces Jakobsson
to friends of his who are higher level characters. He is introduced as a ‘RL [Real Life]
friend’ rather than just a ‘friend’. This distinction made Jakobsson aware that it is
similar to the situation within the mafia where a person can be introduced as a ‘friend
of ours’ suggesting they should become part of the mafia ‘family’ and be protected by
them. From then on in the game Jakobsson is able to ask for help from these higher
level friends and to get items from them to improve his character above their typical

\textsuperscript{21} http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001516.php?page=10
\textsuperscript{22} http://hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dae/papers/Jakobsson.pdf
standard of armour and weaponry for his level. Jakobsson then goes onto look at how there are many situations in MMORPGS whereby the player is forced to ‘group’, join up with others to achieve a goal together. This plays an important role in the socialisation process as this is often where long term connections are first made. Most regular social conventions need to be followed within a group such as good manners, politeness and saying hello and goodbye to the other group members. If you loot items excessively while in the group you could be remembered by others as a ‘ninja looter’ or thief and be mentally blacklisted from future groups. There can also be family ties within the game as many people play the game alongside spouses, siblings or flatmates, this can prove extremely useful in a group situation as it can aid the group further, such as if a player dies and another group member’s husband has a cleric (a class that can resurrect other players) then they are able to log on that character and aid their group further. As the game is international, a language connection can be helpful too and it is not uncommon for some guilds to be (for example) Scandinavian only or British only, thus reducing any problems with understanding each other. Reputation can and often does play a major part in one’s ability to gain progress within any MMORPG. It can, at the lowest level, affect their chances of getting into a group, but it can also affect what guild a player is able to get into and to what level others are able to trust them with valuable items in the game.

Castells looks at social networking from the perspective of the network society. Having come from an urban sociological background, Castells used this knowledge to look at the ‘information age’ but they can be used to look at how a network society works online as well as within ‘real’ society. Some of the main features of a network society include a global economy (evident in all MMORPGs) and politics playing a
large part in society which is also evident in MMORPGs particularly where guild membership is involved.\(^\text{23}\) Howard Rheingold suggests in his book ‘The Virtual Community’\(^\text{24}\) that such online communities dissolve boundaries of identities as well as social boundaries related to time and space (as has previous media done so), because we are pretending to be someone else in these communities and without any conception of time or space in the real world while we are playing these games. As we create new personae for ourselves, do we lose our ‘normal’ persona within that? Or does it change into an amalgamation of the two?

Social networking can create some surprise results. In some cases it can create random acts of kindness, as one example from Nick Yee’s site shows:

‘…my guild was on a raid in a dungeon area and I came across one player’s corpse…I sent this person a "tell" to see if she needed a res. She replied and was very excited that I was there to res her. After she gathered her equipment she tried to give me some Platinum pieces, which I refused since I didn’t go out of my way to help her … I was just there…later, my guild was performing another raid and we were wiped…The person I ressed happened to be in a group near the beginning of the dungeon where we were wiped out, and before I knew it, most of her guild was there to help clear the dungeon and get our corpses back. I mean about 30 other players went out of their way to come and help my friends out just because I helped one of their

\(^{23}\) http://www.tidec.org/geovisions/Castells.html

friends a month before. I don’t know many people who would do
that in real life … All I can say is … Thank you Ostara.\footnote{25}

This example also shows how much reputation can play a part in progressing in the
game. The original player who died remembered that this cleric aided her and helped
her in return at a later date. It is interesting to note that the author of the quote points
out that it is a deed that may not have happened in real life, perhaps in some cases
MMORPGs bring out the best in people.

There are of course examples of some players deliberately getting other players killed
by ‘training’ mobs on them. ‘training’ is a name given to where a player has the
attention of a large number of monsters behind them, a friendly player would run to a
location away from other players so as not to injure others, but some players have
been known to deliberately run them at others to kill them, in the case of Everquest
causing them to lose some experience, and in some cases the level they are currently
on. This is a great aggravation to the players who have died through no fault of their
own. As in ‘real life’ there are nice people and not so nice people who are
deliberately cruel for their own enjoyment.

Many players find themselves drawn to continue to play the game purely to continue
these relationships. They add extra dynamics to the game because humans can be so
unpredictable compared to a pre-programmed routine within a game. This enables the
game playing experience to be quite unique every time the player loads the game.
Some people have even been known to form romantic attachments to other players

\footnote{25 http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000429.php}
that have extended across to the ‘real’ world as well as the virtual world. There have been many examples of players meeting up outside of the game and marrying so it can be a powerful socialising forum. As detailed earlier it is also quite common for two or more family members to play a game together forming stronger relationships through shared hobbies and interests. It is perhaps this strong urge for socialising to achieve anything in such games that has encouraged women to play MMORPGs and online games more than any other genre of video game with around 40% of online players being female.26

One apparent problem with developing relationships through these games, and devoting a large amount of time to them, is that inevitably they end. As almost all MMORPGs are reliant on central servers controlled by the game’s publishers, once a game is no longer financially viable they can be shut down with extremely little forewarning for the players. Most recently the popular MMORPG Asheron’s Call 2, published by Microsoft, was closed. The announcement was made in August 2005, with the servers ceasing to be in operation by December 12th 2005. Obviously this upset and angered many players who felt that they deserved more support by the game’s developers.27 The popular web comic GU Comics uses the metaphor of a fly

26 http://www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php
zapper attracting the flies/MMORPGs to their death as indicated below:

Shadowbane has been notorious for seeming like it is about to be cancelled but has just about held on, and in recent months has become a free MMORPG with no monthly fees. Horizons has had a similar problem, with the game itself being free but the subscription fee remaining in place.

However, some MMORPGs, such as Ultima Online and Everquest 1, remain popular enough for the distributors to continue running the servers but with Ultima Online at nearly ten years old, and Everquest around seven years old, the future could be limited for them both; with their eventual closure leading to many players left with nothing to show for their years of playing besides memories.

By closing a server, the player loses their ‘identity’ within the game permanently and one could argue that all the time they put into the game is wasted. The one saving

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28 http://www.gucomics.com/comics/gu_20060223.jpg
grace is often players remain in contact with others outside of the game, on internet forums. There have been many incidents of guilds from one MMORPG switching en mass to another MMORPG: one of the most famous examples being the Everquest 1 guild Fires of Heaven leaving to play World of Warcraft, continuing the guild name onto this new game. Some players simply quit playing but remain in contact with people via email because they have built up relationships with them that they want to keep. In a way MMORPGs help form a second world of social relationships which in some instances can spill over into the ‘real’ world. Many players meet up outside of the game; personally I have many times but with varying results. Some people are entirely different from their online persona while others are identical which makes the concept of game identity all the more intriguing.

Some people have been known to buy their ‘identity’. A number of websites such as www.mysupersales.com have been set up where you can buy items, money and even entire high level accounts for a variety of different MMORPGs. These somewhat detract from the general purpose of the games, i.e. to create a character that is your own and build it up. It also detracts from the community aspect as the character will retain the name created by the original owner so they will have their own separate ‘past’ and history, which the new owner will have to put up with and redevelop by informing people that they are a different player. There is also the issue of the fact these accounts cost a large amount of money, in some instances a well developed high level character in World of Warcraft can go for up to $500. When Everquest 1 was in its prime there were often characters going for sale at $1,000 or more. These sales were against the EULA (End User License Agreement) set by the game’s

29 http://www.fohguild.org/index.php
manufacturers but often sales continued to go through with the danger being that if the manufacturer found out later on then the account could be simply banned causing the buyer to lose a large amount of money for no gain. Selling items and accounts for monetary gain has become such a big money making method online that there are companies opening ‘virtual sweatshops’ using the lower pay in poor countries such as Romania to provide services within the game to wealthier (and primarily) American customers. Gamersloot.net is one such company that has been featured in the Western media for doing such a thing. \(^{30}\) They employ 11 Romanian employees to play across 12 different PCs for periods of around 10 hours a day to progress further in the game before selling on the assets. The employees are paid the equivalent of £70 a month (around the same amount as a barman in the country would earn for the same amount of hours) and spend their time in a backroom apartment in the small town of Caracal, population around 33,000. As well as gamersloot.net, there are a number of other companies mainly based in Russia and Asia who provide similar services. They concentrate on something called ‘gold farming’ whereby virtual currency is collected and sold on in exchange for real world currency. The Observer newspaper estimates the market in virtual goods’ industry is worth around £500m.

\(^{30}\) The Observer 13 March 2005, p17.
Nick Yee conducted some research on the main age group which purchased such services\textsuperscript{31}, it was predominantly those aged 35 or over. This could correlate with the fact that typically over 35 year olds will earn more than teenagers or twenty-somethings, while also having less time to devote to the game; thus it is simpler for them to just buy the items and gold they need than spend a large amount of their time acquiring them through more typical means. Comments in the research strongly indicate this as well. Although there are no statistics to back this theory up, I would say it is quite possible that the majority of those who play games purely to farm for money or items to sell on, are most likely teenagers or students. This would be because they are the social group who have the most free time statistically, compared to other age groups. It would also be a good source of income for them without having to resort to doing something they disliked to earn money, such as retail work. There are however no statistics to show this so this is purely conjecture. Gold farming and account selling has become such a big business that recently Sony has decided to become a part of it. They offer for Everquest 2, the ‘Station Exchange’, where players can buy accounts and items to use on certain servers selected by Sony, ensuring that they have some element of control over the matter. This has caused much controversy from players of the game, most notably on internet forums where one player stated:

‘Why would I play a game where the developers have a direct financial interest in the items and content?...These games are seen by many as a levelling field. Somewhere those regular social conventions (such as wealth) get thrown out the window

\textsuperscript{31} http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001469.php?page=2
and the “little guy” gets a chance to shine. Buying items and characters destroys this.\textsuperscript{32}

Edward Castronova who has studied the effects of MMORPG economics believes that the concept of buying items and gold for real money is a natural progression for such games\textsuperscript{33}. In 2002 he calculated that the GNP per capita of the world of Everquest (Norrath) was $2,000, comparable to that of Bulgaria and higher than countries such as India and China.\textsuperscript{34} It is simple capitalist monetary sense to determine a way of making money out of a leisure activity such as online gaming. If one looks at other genres of games, similar events are occurring, online FPS (First Person Shooter) games such as Painkiller, Quake 3 and Counter-Strike all have a number of tournaments such as the CPL in which players band together to win tournaments for money and sponsorship deals. Even single player games such as Need For Speed: Underground 2 have a large amount of advertising within them for products such as Burger King which is earning money for the company.\textsuperscript{35}

There are a rising number of games in which money and monetary gain are pivotal to the game’s dynamics. Games such as Entropia Universe\textsuperscript{36} and Second Life\textsuperscript{37} present themselves to be more than just games and to be an entire money making industry. On the Entropia Universe\textsuperscript{38} website it states:

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item http://www.mmorpg.com/showFeature.cfm?loadFeature=204&fp=1024,768,1146481556016,20060501070556
\item http://uk.gamespot.com/news/2005/05/06/news_6123701.html?sid=6123701
\item http://hyperstition.abstractdynamics.org/archives/007585.html
\item PC Gamer – July 2005 p26-27
\item http://www.entropiauniverse.com/en/rich/5000.html
\item http://secondlife.com/
\item http://www.entropiauniverse.com
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
‘The Entropia Universe is not a game. The Entropia Universe is for real. Real people, real activities and a Real Cash Economy in a massive online universe.’

It goes onto describe that you can start an entire new life within the game as well as start businesses and build houses for yourself. In a way it could be seen to be a virtual doll’s house for a games player, but one that the player must pay for with real money to use or buy anything within the game. It truly is creating a second life in which one could escape to as long as they continue to have an income ‘outside’ of the game. There have been examples of entrepreneurial players investing thousands of pounds into the game to buy islands or resorts in the game which they can then sell on piece by piece to make even more money. One famous example is that of Jon Jacobs who paid $100,000 to buy a space resort within Project Entropia (now known as Entropia Universe)\(^\text{39}\), he is now selling plots of land to other players to gain more money which can then be converted into real currency. This could be seen as detracting somewhat from the purpose of such ‘worlds’, they are created as an escape from the real world but are gradually becoming more and more like the real world. There have even been examples of such negative real world problems such as muggings. In the game Lineage 2, players were ‘attacked’ and had items stolen from them and sold on eBay.\(^\text{40}\) There are some even more extreme examples of the negative sides to these worlds, such as one incident where a Chinese man killed another man over a virtual sword. Qiu Chengwei stabbed Zhu Caoyuan in the chest when he found out he had sold his virtual sword (from the game Legend of Mir 3) for 7,200 Yuan (around

\(^{39}\) http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4374610.stm

\(^{40}\) http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4165880.stm
£473) last year. He was sentenced to life imprisonment. While China does not have any specific laws regarding virtual theft, South Korea has a section of its police force devoted to investigating in-game crimes because it is such a common occurrence. It is arguable that the escapism MMORPGs provide, is not so noticeable anymore with such crimes being committed over a game and virtual property that is possibly just the property of the game creators and not the gamers themselves. There have also been a large number of deaths reported attributed to people continually playing the game for so many hours and days that they simply drop dead of heart failure and also cases where children are neglected by their parents to the extent that they die while their parents are busy playing the game. There seems to be an increase in the amount of people who seem to take the game more seriously than their own (and dependents in their care) lives, as well as a fetishisation regarding the urge to have rare items in the game so much that people pay real money for these virtual ‘things’.

In the past year or so there has been much more coverage of, and articles written on, the ‘overlapping’ identities between the real world and the virtual world, primarily driven by BBC Online’s coverage of this form of media. There have been cases such as Sara Andrew’s case in World of Warcraft whereby she started a guild aimed to be gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender ‘friendly’. She was then told by Blizzard, the creators of World of Warcraft, to stop advertising the guild in such a way or else she would be banned from the game. Refusing to accept, she spread news of her plight to a number of online discussion boards and caused a large amount of complaints being

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41 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4072704.stm
42 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4137782.stm
sent to Blizzard until they backed down and apologised publicly to her. This is an interesting demonstration of player ‘power’ to force change within a game despite the wishes of the game’s publishers, as well as an example of real life identities wanting to be transferred to a game. People want to express their sexuality in the game as well as outside, because it is part of their identity which they want to maintain regardless of the location.

Not a huge deal of academic analysis has been conducted on MMORPGs but the most prominent of these is Sherry Turkle, a clinical psychologist who has looked at the phenomenon of MMORPGs and how they affect people, in relation to computer addiction. She claims that representing oneself in a MUD (Multi-User Dungeon, the forefathers of MMORPGs) could be therapeutic for some people:

‘…the obese can be slender, the beautiful plain, the ‘nerdy’ sophisticated…’

44 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4700754.stm
She states that it gives people the chance to ‘express multiple and often unexplored aspects of the self, to play with their identity and to try out new ones’ in a safe environment where no one knows their ‘true’ identity. She suggests that MUDs are like laboratories for creating an identity that one is happy with. She argues that although we try to see ourselves as separate and unique from machines with our emotions and feelings, we are also playing with computer programs which we think of as alive in these games, which are becoming increasing pivotal in our day to day lives. She believes, much as Marshall McLuhan believes, that we are trying to ‘retribalize’ within these games and online communities as society fragments more and more outside. She uses one example of a shy young man named Gordon who spent much of his life feeling unpopular and insecure, until he had a fresh new start at a foreign school in India. This made him realise that carrying no ‘baggage’ enabled him to be a different person, and the person he wanted to be. When he discovered MUDs, he realised this also enabled him to be a different person. He experimented with many different characters, all with a qualities that he was trying to develop within himself. He describes one character to Turkle as:

‘…an avatar of me. He is like me, but more effusive, more apt to be flowery and romantic with a sort of tongue-in-cheek attitude toward the whole thing.’ A second character is ‘quiet, older, less involved in what other people are doing,’ in sum, more self-confident and self-contained than the real-life Gordon. A third character is female. Gordon compares her to himself: ‘She is

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more flirtatious, more experimental, more open sexually
definitely.⁴⁶

These games have allowed Gordon to express himself more and develop into the person he wants to be, at least online if not in the real world. It has heightened his sense of his self as a work in progress; he discards a character once it has achieved its goal of developing him further. It has enabled him to constantly ‘grow’ as a person in ways that regular social interaction would not be able to help. It would be extremely difficult for him to experience his female side in the real world without some form of social stigma by some parts of society, while in a MUD (and in a MMORPG) it is deemed perfectly acceptable for people to ‘swap’ genders for a time.

The games also enable people to ‘experience’ parts of the world they might not ever be able to visit in reality. With American players playing alongside European players there is a cultural exchange of ideas and simple concepts such as different local currencies and different issues. This could be particularly useful to those who are physically unable to travel to such countries, such as the disabled. They are able to become something else within the game and feel less isolated and restricted in their movements.

Returning to the original idea of MUDs and MMORPGs being therapeutic, there is also the risk that the player becomes ‘too’ involved in the game, rejecting any help outside of the game because they are too wrapped up in the virtual world they have created. It is extremely easy to use these games as an escape from the real world and

⁴⁶ Sherry Turkle, Life On The Screen (New York: Touchstone, 1995) p.190
the problems encountered. Turkle highlights the case of two MUD players who experience severe depression and retreat into the game in which they can control many aspects, rather than face the real world that they feel they are unable to control. One player Stewart comments:

‘When you feel you’re stagnating and you feel there’s nothing going on in your life and you’re stuck in a rut, it’s very easy to be on there for a very large amount of time’

There seems to be a fine line between possible therapeutic elements and outright addiction and reliance on virtual worlds. It also possibly makes it harder for people to talk in person about their problems because it is so much easier to just type them and not have to face the person you are confiding in, this is especially true if it is a particularly traumatic or embarrassing problem the person faces.

Baudrillard’s concept of hyperreality is an intriguing notion that can directly be used alongside MMORPGs and MUDs. Baudrillard suggests that the world we live in has now been replaced by a media created world in which we see events unfold: i.e. we see the world in the way in which the media wishes us to see it, rather than the true picture. Through doing this we do not see ‘true’ reality. Consumerism aids this by tricking an individual into detaching from any real emotional engagement and instead opting for the artificial simulation that a material object brings them, essentially so that people care more about what they have than feelings. There are many examples of what is considered hyperreal, such as a drink with a flavour that does not really exist naturally, a plastic Christmas tree that feels better than a real one, and of course
MMORPGs which seek to replicate life but make it ‘better’. While Baudrillard originally referred to the idea of another world as ‘virtual reality’, it could also extend to the virtual worlds in which MMORPGs are based. As seen in examples above, they allow people to lead another life, and in some instances they spend more time in their virtual world simulation, than the real world. MMORPGs such as The Sims Online and Second Life even seek to completely replicate life which beggars the question why someone would want to play a game that is identical to life, personally I would say it is because they have more control over a virtual life, if nothing else they can simply turn the PC off and they have escaped that ‘life’. A virtual life also means that there is no possibility of dying, once you die in a game you simply respawn once more. You are immortal, something that is impossible in the real world. There is also no illness or disability. In some ways it is the utopian dream: no one dies of disease, no one suffers from poverty or starvation and if you die during a fight you will always return. There have been many essays written using Baudrillard’s concepts in conjunction with the film ‘The Matrix’. Although it seems somewhat far fetched at this current time, it is possible that in future generations people seek escape from the real world by ‘transporting’ themselves to a virtual world: it would be a mere physical extension to what they are doing currently. Although it may seem far fetched at this current time, if it were possible to keep people alive in the game even though they had terminal illnesses outside of the game, it could be an ideal way to ensure immortality. The main issue with something such as this is would we reach a point where it is impossible to distinguish what is real and what is not? This is also where the idea of hyperidentity features prominently as many people could reach the point where they do not know whether they are acting as themselves or as their online persona. The psychologist, Jung, being of the viewpoint that we use each persona as a
mask to hide our real identity, adjusting it when we deem fit so that we fit into society’s cultural requirements. Each online game can require a different persona so is it possible that we could reach a stage where it is impossible to be able to tell the difference? It is already common for people to act differently depending on who they are with, but if there were two separate ‘worlds’ (the real world and the virtual world), it is entirely possible as demonstrated above that it would be impossible to tell the difference between the two, and to have had one’s identity ‘changed’ due to experiences within games. Only time will tell whether this will occur.
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