

My Gnome, My Guild, My Self: Collective-Projective Identities in MMOs

Introduction

In a kitchen in Phoenix, Arizona—far from my home—a group of people I simultaneously both knew and didn't know handed me an unusual gift. The people were members of a World of Warcraft guild that I belong to, and many of the members I had known (online only) for over two years. The gift was a tabard: a long bright yellow scarf with pockets on the side and—notably—the guild's crest sewn on to these pockets. It was a strange moment. I was used to seeing my game avatar, Spazma, as a combination of my game and real world identities. What was unsettling was a room full of people presenting me with an item of clothing wherein my real world identity was being marked by an in-game identity. Even more striking, was the feeling that I was part of something bigger than that—as part of the guild, I had taken on an extra identity that exists solely in a digital space (but was being enacted in a real space). The experience was remarkable. I was representing a number of real and imaginary identities at once—what I will soon identify as a *collective- projective identity*.

In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee introduces the idea of a “projective identity”: identities that combine notions of the self and the avatar. But while Gee vaguely discusses Multiplayer Online Games (MMOs), such as World of Warcraft, MMOs are a space for an even deeper understanding of identity than Gee alluded to. MMOs, in fact, present a perfect space for understanding how identity of the self and avatar are intertwined, but often also as a part of a group identity. By examining the aforementioned *World of Warcraft* guild, I will

show how players construct these fused identities, and how the collective model fostered by these games assembles a larger group identity. By showing the potential power of the collective-projective identity I will ultimately explain how it constructs a different, subtler kind of group literacy than what Gee discusses in his book. This kind of complex role-playing relationship will ultimately shed light on how game related text and literacy can be used to develop notions of identity and identification.

Video Games and Literacy

In his book on video games and literacy, Gee's primary modus operandi is a discussion how the content of video games can provide productive tools for pedagogy, and, more specifically, for literacy. Gee explains, "When people learn to play video games, they are learning a new *literacy*. Of course, this is not the way the word "literacy" is normally used" (13). Specifically, identity is one of the key aspects of Gee's study. He suggests that the video game constructs three different kinds of identity: a virtual identity (the identity of the avatar on the screen), a real world identity (the identity of the player in real life), and what he identifies as a "projective identity". The projective identity serves as the combination of the other two identities. As such, he explains that "projective" invokes a double meaning as the player both projects their personality into the avatar, and at the same time the player is, "seeing the virtual character as one's own project in the making, a creature whom I imbue with a certain trajectory through time defined by my aspirations for what I want that character to be and become (within the limitations of her capacities, of course)" (55). There is a complicated relationship here, and the fuzziness

between real and imagined identities creates a potent sense of identification between the real and the imagined.

Gee suggests this power, in the combination of the projective identity with the other video game identities. He explains:

It transcends identification with characters in novels or movies, for instance, because it is both *active* (the player actively does things) and *reflexive*, in the sense that once the player has made some choices about the virtual character, the virtual character is now developed in a way that sets certain parameters about what the player can do. The virtual character redounds back on the player and affects his or her future actions (58).

The combination of activity and reflexivity is a strong attribute of video game play.

Essentially, this means that by performing within the video game, players are also able to embody the multiple viewpoints of the multiple identities involved in the game story. The level of enactment allows for a deeper sense of identification which, in turn, feeds more into the player's reflexivity. **PERSONAL EXAMPLE**

As discussed in the introduction, though, this paper will not be looking at any and all video games as Gee does. Rather, I am looking at a very specific kind of video game: massively multiplayer online (MMO) role-playing games. These games have very distinct features from typical video games, in that they involve online persistent worlds (worlds that exist before and after the player's avatar enters and leaves), and a variety of kinds of communities, involving a more social form of play. While often players live in geographically remote locations they are able to log on to the game and play simultaneously in the same space. This kind of gaming does, I will show, still provoke a deep identification between the player and the virtual character, but the uniquely social nature of these games also form an identification with a larger game community.

Because of the social nature of MMOs, another one of Gee's video game theories is particularly relevant to these games: what he refers to as "affinity groups" which are a group of like-minded people associated with a specific game. Gee explains, "People in an affinity group can recognize others as more or less 'insiders' to the group. They may not see many people in the group face-to face, but when they interact with someone on the Internet or read something about the domain, they can recognize certain ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing as more or less typical of people who are 'into' the semiotic domain" (27). Thus, Gee's notion of the affinity group is crucial to understanding how a geographically remote group of players are able to relate to one another in a game world without ever actually physically interacting. Thus, when I met my guild members in Arizona, they recognized me as part of an affinity group, giving me the tabard as proof of my "insider" status.

While Gee talked about MMOs to a small extent in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, his analysis lacked the depth that is necessary to understand how MMO communities form an entirely different kind of identity, and how this identity, too, relates back to literacy. Furthermore, while Gee's description of affinity groups for video games in general was accurate, he did not explain their special status in the online gaming community. Because these online spaces hinge on communities such as guilds, raid groups, and teams, the notion of an "affinity group" is integral to how players enact their identities: as player, as virtual character, and as member of a group. My discussion of MMOs will extend how Gee describes the idea of a "projective identity" to include the collaborative aspects of the affinity group.

Methodology

To take a step back, it seems important to discuss my methodologies for the observations I have made in the MMO community I will be discussing. While I have been observing this community for a few years, now, I am also (simultaneously) a participant—both in the *World of Warcraft* community at the time this is being written, and a previous community in *City of Heroes*, another MMO which many of the guild members used to play. Ultimately, the behaviors that I observed in a *World of Warcraft* guild seemed compelling enough to write about. Graciously, the members of the guild have allowed me to record chat sessions and bulletin board discussions, and many allowed me to interview them.

The five guild members that I interviewed occurred between November 17 and 19, 2006. Three of the interviewees (Carrie, Diane, and Cindy)¹ are sisters—Carrie and Cindy both live in Arizona, and Diane lives in Ohio, and the game helps to facilitate their long-distance relationship. The other two guild members that I interviewed, Brian and Linda, are husband and wife and live in the Chicago area (having traveled to Arizona to meet up with the other guild members).

The resulting information is, by no means, representative of all MMO communities (or even *World of Warcraft* communities). Being representative of the whole, though, is not always the most important part of studying online communities. In her essay “Does *WoW* Change Everything?” T. L. Taylor writes that it is essential to start studying the individual nature of how guilds and similar online communities function, rather than trying to make grand generalizations about all of them. She explains, “Rather than be disheartened by or dismissive of the shifting landscape of MMOGs, we should

¹ Pseudonyms

embrace the partial stories, the partial truths we are finding in the collection of work that continues to emerge in the field” (334). Thus, given Taylor’s suggestion of looking at individual communities in the “shifting landscapes,” I have determined that this particular guild is ideal for studying how projective identities interact with group identities. I will be referring to this combined identity as the collective-projective identity.

Projective Identities in MMOs

In order to understand how the collective-projective identity functions with the members of the *World of Warcraft* guild, it is necessary to look at how projective identities work for the individual guild members. In effect, like other video games that involve avatars, each guild member is constantly juggling their real world identities and the identities of the virtual character they are playing. As Gee explained, a player are projecting their own beliefs and mannerisms onto the avatar, and, in turn, the avatar is a projection of the player. Gee refers to this as the “projective identity” but because I will be referring to multiple kinds of projective identities, I will be referring to this as the simple-projective identity. While simple-projective identities in MMOs are similar to what he describes in other video games, the connection between the identities (I have found) is even stronger and more potent than Gee ever imagined in his study. Because Gee’s study was done when MMOs were still in a nascent phase, his work only begins to describe the potential of the simple-projective identity in these game landscapes.

Like in other role-playing games, in MMOs, players are able to take on different roles (i.e. fighter, healer, spell caster, etc.) to identify with their avatars and use this identification to project their interests in a much more intense way than Gee describes in

his book. In many ways, players are able to transfer real-world interests and problems into their game play, showing what might be referred to as their “ruling passions.” In their book *Understanding Literacy as Social Practice*, Barton and Hamilton describe their experiences when interviewing participants in their study about literacy. They explain:

When we went to interview people *we* wanted to find out about reading, writing, and literacy practices. Unfortunately, it seemed, the people we interviewed often wanted to talk about something else; each person had a ruling passion, something *they* wanted to talk about and share with us. We talked to them about literacy, it seems, and they talked to us about their lives. Often this appeared to have no relation to reading and writing, and we were tempted to say, ‘No, don’t talk about that: tell us where you keep your books; tell us if you use the library.’ In fact, as the interviews continued, we found that when people told us their stories they ended up telling us much more about literacy. (83)

Like what Barton and Hamilton have described here, game players have translated their ruling passions into game play in order to focus their interests and work through issues. Also, in relation to what Barton and Hamilton describe these ruling passions are integral to describing the literacy practices of these people: though not the same kind of literacy. While Barton and Hamilton are describing ruling passions within the scope of traditional literacy, the members of the guild, it seems, use their ruling passions to help construct projective identities and have stronger game-world literacy.

For example, Cindy discusses the characters that she created in *City of Villains* (the sister game to *City of Heroes*) in terms of her out-of-game ruling passions. She explained that she named her characters, “[...] Condolence Card and Greeting Card, because I’m a greeting card buyer. So I kind of had a theme on my characters there.” Being a “greeting card buyer” is a reflection of her ruling passions: in this case an affinity for greeting cards. The game, in this case, has created a space that creates an affordance

for Cindy to project her identity more strongly because of her ruling passions. But while this example shows a simple way that players can parlay ruling passions from the real world into the game, more serious issues can also find their way into simple-projective identities.

One guild member, Brian describes his experiences to playing a healer and how it relates to his real world experiences. “As a heal support class... you kind of get the chance (and it’s a kind of codependent thing, I think)... you get the chance to... there have been times when you do a dungeon raid, or a 20 person raid, or something like that, where you are teetering on the edge of a wipe (meaning that everybody just dies). And you have the chance to either allow the wipe to happen, or seemingly (and you have to convince yourself of this) by sheer force of will, prevent the wipe.” He later continues, “You get the chance to fix things from breaking... you know... you can’t get the chance to fix things that went wrong in your family? But by golly this raid ain’t gonna wipe.” Like Carrie’s previous account, Brian is using issues from his the real world and projecting them into the abilities and character of his avatar. While the avatar might have some similarities to the real world (“fixing problems” as he mentioned) the gamescape provides him with a means of controlling things that he may not be able to control in the real world. Thus, his projective identity in the game has a resemblance to his real-world persona, but varies in the degree of power that he is able to wield. Once again, the game has created an affordance through simple-projective identities—one that allows Brian to work through out-of-game issues through in-game personas.

One of the most moving examples of simple-projective identities was shown by Carrie, who began to play healer characters after being diagnosed with breast cancer. She

explains, “What could be more fun than going around healing people when you can’t heal yourself?” In describing a character she had built in a previous MMO that she had played, *City of Heroes*, she explained building a digital character who embodied the difficulties in this point in her life: the backstory she had written for the character was a cancer survivor who had become a super hero. This character, Carrie explains, both had similarities and differences from her real world issues. “See I never had to have radiation... so I never lost my hair. But she had lost her hair and it never grew back... but the radiation had gone askew or something and she woke up one night and her sheets were drenched in sweat, but they were glowing. That was fun. She was very, very strong, being a blaster she did a lot of damage.” This example shows just how strong and how useful the simple-projective identity is able to be in this game space. While Gee’s work forecasted the potential of in-game identity role-play, it is much deeper and has far more potential than he alluded to in the MMO.

One of the more interesting facets of the projective identity in the MMO space is (with some, but not all players) a desire to enact their projective identities in a way that highlights both. For example, in guild chats of this particular guild, players often interchange between referring to one another using both real world names and game world names. Additionally, players often spice the guild chat with remarks about events that occur in the game, as well as events occurring in the real world. For example, in the following chat transcript players in the guild discuss the “geekery” of a real world person using an in-game joke. The following reference to the “Florida Orc” is referring to both in-game and out-of game personas. An “Orc” is a race in the game *World of Warcraft*—

and one that is an enemy to these particular players and their in-game characters.² Thus, during game play, one player commented about what he saw on the caller ID in the real world—outside of the game:

P1: The caller ID on the phone says "The Florida Orc" is calling.
 P2: Rock
 P3: heheh
 P4: someone has too much time on their hands.
 P5: Don't answer
 P2: Answer with ZUG ZUG!
 P6: lol
 P1: LOL
 P2: ROFL
 P2: That, ladies and gents, is called 'creative geekery;
 P7: LOL
 P3: Good use of time, I say

This transcript is striking in numerous ways, in respect to the projective identity of MMOs. First, an unknown person (being identified as “The Florida Orc”) has obviously used an in-game identity to project his real world identity to others (in the real world). Simultaneously, though, Player 1 is discussing this incident to the other players in the guild chat, which achieves a variety of responses (though mostly amused). Meanwhile, players are using their in-game identities to discuss a real world incident (the phone call in question) and giving Player 1 advice as to how to handle the meshing of a real-world and game-world persona, within a real-world context. But, in doing this, they are also mixing the real and game world personas within the *game* context. Thus, this conversation shows the potentially complicated nature of projective identities when others are involved.

² *World of Warcraft* is divided into two primary factions: alliance and horde. The above transcript was taken from a group of players while playing as their alliance characters, though many of these same players also have characters on the horde side. Thus, while playing an alliance character, an Orc, who is a member of the Horde, is considered the “enemy.”

Collective Projective Identities in MMOs

It is obvious from the last example (of game chat) that a large part of the unusual nature of the simple-projective identity in MMOs is due to the high level of community. Communities in MMOs, as previously discussed, can be short or long term: they can be temporary team-ups and long term guilds. Primarily, in this paper, I am discussing the longer term community that is formed by a guild. While most guilds are different (defined by the members and their attitudes and interests) looking at the guild creates an opportunity to consider a projective identity that exceeds the boundaries of the single player: the collective projective identity. This collective projective identity, as I see it, is not only the combinations of projective identities carried by each player, but the identity of the community as a whole, and the multifaceted way this identity exists in both the real and game world, projecting the overall beliefs and interests of the players in it. Essentially, this collective-projective identity doesn't involve only a single person projecting their real world and game world interests, but the act of taking others along with them in this projection. The collective-projective identity involves a group of people who are all willing to push their multiple identities forward in a way that forms a group.

Being presented with the tabard (as I discussed at the beginning of this essay) was an example of the collective projective identity. While on one hand, the players were standing next to me in real life, the item of clothing they were presenting me with was a representation of not only my in game character, but also as a part of my membership in their guild. The combination of these identities, I will show, creates compelling and unusual results.

A second example of the collective projective identity occurred on the same trip. Numerous people in the house were all logged on to the game—those who lived there were logged on to the desktop computers in their rooms, and those of us who were visiting were on our laptops, sitting around a kitchen table. Brian, who was sitting at the table, asked me to log on as “Spazmalina” my main character in this particular game. When I asked him why, he responded that we were having an in-game guild meeting. I hurriedly logged on and went to the meeting point where others had already begun to gather. What occurred next was a mass gathering of the collective projective identity. Players both in the room and at a distance all gathered in the same virtual space, talking, dancing, showing off powers, and emoting in various ways. Linda, a guild mate who was sitting in the other room, walked up to me and hugged me virtually. Other players, some of whom did not have a computer portal into the gamescape at that particular moment, wandered around in the real world looking over the shoulders of people who were playing, and involving themselves in this physically social moment. Because we were simultaneously playing in real and game worlds, players interchanged between yelling things out to one another and typing them into the chat channel. This online guild meeting was yet another enactment of the collective projective identity. Members of the guild were being flagged as people who should specifically be meeting at a certain space and time, virtually, regardless of whether they were in the same physical location as other guild members.

In this particular guild, the collective projective identity is enacted on the guild bulletin board. In the introductory message, one of the guild’s founders writes:

We are a collection of mostly casual players of the World of Warcraft on the Lothar server. The [Guild] should always strive to help other [Guild Members] and other people met in the world. This means healing, buffing, grouping, assisting those who may need assistance. You should always be respectful, helpful, and never greedy.

In summary: Being an ass is a reason to be kicked from the guild, so be friendly and help others!

The guild definition above articulates how both the player and avatar identities should behave to take part within this society. On one hand, the description above focuses on the players: the members are referred to as “casual” players, and are asked to be generally “respectful” and “helpful” to others in the game—both in and out of the guild. This enactment how the player’s identities should be constructed in the game world. But, at the same time, the excerpt above, to a certain extent, focuses on character behaviors. By appealing to players to regularly “heal” and “buff” other players, the guild leader is requesting that the virtual characters should carry the same “respectful” and “helpful” behaviors of the players themselves.

In effect, one of the large components of this particular guild’s collective identity centers around the notion of “family.” Family can, essentially, be seen as one of the “ruling passions” for the collective-projective identity. Within the guild, “family” functions both literally and figuratively. While, on one hand, the guild is composed of numerous sets of family members, conversely, many guild members also characterize themselves as being like a “family.”

The actual family members of this guild help to define its collective projective identity. For example, three of the guild regulars are sisters: while two of them live in the same geographic location, one lives on the other side of the country. Carrie, one of the sisters discussed how the gamescape has altered her

relationship with her sister, Diane. She explained that when they first began playing together:

We would team together a lot. And even when we weren't teaming together we would just chat. That kept us... Diane and I are really, really close. Essentially I raised her for a variety of reasons. And even though we were mostly young and stupid when we moved out here, she was 18, and I was 26? So we kind of had to grow up together a little. I was hugely naïve but lived with my parents until I was 26. So it was hard when she moved off to Ohio... we had astronomical phone bills... And we thought, 'If we have this game we can chat all the time and we don't have to spend that much money on those phone bills!'

While in the end, game play did not actually result in less phone time for them, the game space has provided them with not only new topics of discussion (and new mutual literacies) but also a physical space where they are able to spend time together. Because Carrie's aforementioned health issues often thwart a large amount of travel, the virtual community constructed within the game becomes an essential component of their relationship.

In a similar way, Brian's wife Andrea discussed how they used the game to facilitate a long-distance relationship during a time period where they were geographically separated. Andrea explained:

It helped to have a way to interact with him across this enormous distance. And I had just suffered a terrible loss. I mean he moved the year before for his job on Memorial Day. My dad passed away in the middle of that September, and then it was the first of the New Year when we started playing together. So I was really kind of in a weird time, personally. And this was kind of a way for us to kind of connect across the miles and a way for me to sort of have emotional support for the weirdness that I was feeling and trying to deal with all on my own.

Similar to Carrie and Diane, Brian and Andrea were able to use the game space and community in a way that facilitated a difficult and long-distance relationship. By constructing virtual characters in the same virtual community, they were able to

embody space in a way that they were unable to, physically, at the time. Once again, this is a by-product of the collective-projective identity: the real world and game world identities of Brian and Andrea were able to be combined in a way through the gamescape that allowed them to relate to one another in a productive way.

Family, though, is also an important figurative term within this particular guild community. While numerous members of the guild are part of one another's family, many guild members also cite a "family" type atmosphere and use the term to discuss the closeness with others in the community. For example, despite having her actual family (her husband) within the space, Andrea remarks that the members of the guilds are her "extended family" and that the guild has, "gone beyond simply this is my circle of friends and acquaintances." Cindy, who also has family members in the game (Carrie and Diane) also, used the word "family" to describe the relationships between guild members. Thus, the collective-projective identity fostered by the guild goes beyond the traditional sense of family and attempts to construct a family out of community and interests.

One issue worth considering using the notions of the collective-projective identity is the idea of video game literacy sponsorship. In *Literacy in American Lives*, Deborah Brandt describes literacy sponsors as, "[...] delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited. Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion,

or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes” (19). The notion of literacy sponsors is a helpful way for considering how video game players expand into this different kind of literacy—particularly for those who are not necessarily initially predisposed to be video game players. For example, the aforementioned relationships between Linda and Brian as well as Carrie and Diane were both egged on by one convincing the other to start playing the game. The collective-projective identity of the community (through family or the family values of a group) is a means for introducing new people to this type of literacy and helping them learn its potential value.

Within this family situation, certain behaviors are encoded as being unacceptable for the community at large. In addition to the previous bulletin board post introducing new players to the guild, guild members maintain a strict sense of the kinds of language that should and should not be used in the guild chat channel. When players do bypass these rules, bulletin board posts and discussion often remind them of the importance of obeying them within this community. For example, after a recent incident, Carrie posted the following on the guild bulletin board:

I think many of us have played MMORPG's in several iterations over our lifetimes. We have seen great and noble 'guilds,' and those that were dysfunctional at best.

We have had a great run as a guild. We have many RL [Real Life] friends that have joined and we're all continuing to make new friends, and I have found myself certainly richer for that.

Yet, as we grow, let's not lose sight of what makes us the guild that's too good to lose. We are generous; we are considerate; we are compassionate and we are good people!

I bring this up because I would remind us that we must continue to be sensitive to all our members. Some words that are used in popular vernacular are not always considered right by everyone. For instance, I have a huge problem with people using 'retard' or 'retarded' as a pejorative. Hell, I'll even report that to a GM [Game Master] when I see it in chat.

And I will confess to having the vocabulary of a sailor in real life, but I know that my lovely expletives aren't appreciated by everyone, so I try, as a consideration of my guild's feelings, not to use them.

So, please. think twice about the words you use. You may think this is nitpicky, but really, it's being considerate and respectful of the feelings of your guildmates. And I implore you all, that if I say something that you find out of line, please, PLEASE, let me know.

The rhetoric of the above post is compelling from the collective-projective when looked at in terms of collective-projective identities. First, Carrie is asserting that most members have some experiences (both good and bad) in various kinds of online game communities. Furthermore, she is bridging a gap between the real world and game world identities by affirming that many players are, actually, real life friends. But, additionally, she suggests that this kind of community is not necessarily naturally occurring and without work, and that certain behaviors (and languages) are necessary in order to maintain the community that has been built. Additionally, by acknowledging the difference between her real life language (where she has the “vocabulary of a sailor”) she also acknowledges that separate space of the collective-projective identity of the community as a whole, and that to not disturb this a certain kind of language and respect must be maintained.

These examples of the collective-projective identity, thus, provide an expansion of the notion discussed by Gee. By viewing literacy as something that goes beyond reading a writing, and considering it more about the literacy of a practice (such as video games) it becomes possible to understand the nature of

learning and communication. Furthermore, though, by considering the projective identity in terms of the affinity groups that construct them, the collective-projective identity emerges as a new way of understand community and community identity. What is necessary for this identity to exist is not only the blurring of boundaries between the real and virtual identities, but also the boundaries of how these combined identities function in both real and virtual space. Like negotiating a “guild meeting” in a virtual space while in a room full of many of the same people in a real space, the boundaries between the identity of a real person in a virtual group, and a virtual person in a real group become necessarily indistinguishable.

Implications

The potential implications of the collective-projective identity for literacy are numerous, and there is not space to discuss them each in great detail in this paper. These implications include understanding how video game literacy affects sponsorship, leisure, work, and community development. I will briefly sketch out these ideas for the purpose of potential future study.