

**IDENTITY, THE AVATAR, AND COMMUNITIES IN *STAR WARS THE
OLD REPUBLIC* AND RELATED DIGITAL WORLDS**

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my Oma, my Opa, my Mom, and my Dad as well as everyone else who helped support me during my meandering journey through higher education.

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It is perhaps reductive to say that identity is complex and the way we interact with technology makes it more so. In this thesis, I seek to understand how certain digital worlds affect our identities. To accomplish this goal, I conducted an ethnographic study within *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, a massive multi-player on-line role-playing game, where individuals create and interact with online personas. Following other research on single player worlds (Waggoner 2009), my research examines the idea of identity by splitting it into three parts the physical, the digital, and the liminal spaces between physical and digital identities. I argue that Waggoner's ideas of identity can be applied to the players of *Star Wars the Old Republic*. Further I suggest that the concept of projective identity (Gee 2003, Waggoner 2009) provides a productive approach for understanding how players express themselves in such a place. I contended that projective identity is what emerges from the liminal spaces between a players physical and virtual identity, and that it is created with intention and influence from both. In what follows, I first introduce the world of *The Old Republic* before reviewing other research on digital worlds and theories of identity specific to my project. Then I move onto cover the results of my methods reflecting on what was planned and the actual

implementation. After that I present my results and discussion of them before offering some tentative conclusions.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A queue has formed in the stronghold section of the 'fleet', which is short for the Republic fleet where the majority of Jedi, troopers, and Republic aligned smuggler spend their time.

A message stating "Stronghold section of the fleet credit giveaway in memory of Tim, line up to trade," goes out over the public general channels. These are available for all players in the vicinity to read. But only paying players may write in them. Tim was the name of a player who passed away in real life

"No pets or mounts please," one of the organizers messages in an attempt to limit the chaos in the line. The line shuffles forward bit by bit a far cry from the usual acrobatics and frantic running that most players enact in this virtual world. In this case, those in the line start and stop suddenly trying to keep the queue orderly.

"I've got a second line over here," another organizer calls out and some move away from the queue with the usual frenetic speed and energy most her display. But the first queue is moving along quickly enough and most remain.

"Is this real?" someone asks over the public communication channels. It was easy to believe that this was some sort of elaborate scam considering what was happening. But the question also highlights the liminal space we were occupying between the virtual worlds we were sharing and Tim's real life passing.

"Can I ask everybody, before I do this, can everybody involved, show your respects to our fallen friend." The message goes out from the first announcer and the message elicits many different responses including, kneeling, salutes and remembrances.

“His name was Tim.”

“He loved ancient Egypt, cats and Star Wars. He had a daughter and two sons.”

I arrive at front of the queue and the person speaking prompts me to trade with him and he hands me a 100 million credits just as advertised before sending me on my way. A considerable amount of in game currency by itself which becomes staggering considering the number of people in line. I manage a quick thank you and offer my condolences before heading off to the side to watch the rest of the queue and hear more about the player that had passed away.

“He was a bright soul in a dark world and one I didn’t get to know nearly well enough,” one player says about him.

“I will use part of this to brighten someone’s day,” another person messages on being handed their money.

“I am so sorry for your loss. May his memory be eternal, and may he rest in peace,” someone else says as they leave the queue.

“Rest in peace my guy, didn’t know you but you have some great friends.”

One of the organizers calls out, “Emerald, Barnes come to me please, we just met tonight, for your support and love I am honored to make you both Billionaires.”

“Your [sic] joking you can’t be serious!” Emerald exclaims.

“Always remember that kindness, and compassion are what we are about, tonight we are SWTOR [*Star Wars: The Old Republic*], tonight we are Star Wars, and what that means is that we must do better as a community, end what is toxic in SWTOR,” Fiskur says. His words are met with a resounding response of, “This is the way,” from the remaining crowd evoking the now famous line of the Mandalorian.

1.1: Problem statement

Identity is a complex thing and it can mean a great many things to a great many people. The term has been criticized (Wetherell 2010) as being so broad as to be useless, and yet it has persisted. For this research, I'm adopting the three-part definition described by James Gee (as cited in Waggoner 2009); real, virtual, and projective identities. Real identities have the most difficult definition because of their breadth; it is age, gender, jobs, hobbies, history, etc. In other words, real identity is all the aspects that make up an individual as a being in the world. This is a rather broad definition though, so it is more useful to consider real identity as a person's experience of those categories (Tilly 1998). However, as we become more and more integrated with our technology we must understand how it changes how we see identity. My specific attention is on virtual identity as experienced in digital worlds through the avatars we use to move within those worlds, such as the scene described above. Taking place in a digital world it illustrates the close relationship between identity and the avatar. With that in mind, we can define a digital world by four qualifying factors: First, they are places with worldness, which means they are traversable and can be interacted with. Second, they are inhabited by people and have a social factor. Third, they are enabled by online technologies and persistent; meaning that even when a user is not participating in a digital world it is still active without them. Fourth, avatars allow the user to embody themselves in that digital world (Boellstorff et al 2012:7).

The avatar is the player's representative in-game and means to interact with the game world. It is their character. As a result, I argue that the avatar is the player's virtual

and real identity mixing and meeting others, productive of the third category, projective identities. Waggoner defines projective identity through a character that he has created:

The kind of person I want Bead Bead to be, the kind of history I want her to have, the kind of person and history I am trying to build in and through her is what I mean by a projective identity. Since these aspirations are my desires for Bead Bead, the projective identity is both mine and hers, and it is a space in which I can transcend both her limitations and my own... In this identity, the stress is on the interface between—the interactions between—the real-world person and the virtual character mixture and in between of both real and virtual. (Waggoner 2009: 15).

The link between avatars and identity is nowhere more realized than in places like *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, and further, it should be understood in terms of the game's world. The avatar is an aspect of virtual world sociality. As Boellstorff states, "Actual-world sociality cannot explain virtual-world sociality. The sociality of virtual worlds develops on its terms; it references the actual world but is not simply derivative of it" (2015: 63). As the above vignette about Tim's death indicates, these relationships can be quite rich and complexly interrelated.

My research addresses the relationship between players and their avatars. In particular, this research was initially directed by the following questions: How do avatars expand and reflect the users' identity? What does the avatar mean to the player? How can the avatar transcend a single digital world?

While the latter question proved difficult to assess, due to the lack of instances of player communities that moved from one game to another during the time of my research, I was able to focus on my other questions. Addressing these helps us to understand what does it take to create a community within a digital world.

1.2: Site selection

Star Wars: The Old Republic (SWTOR) is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game, or MMORPG for short, that is based upon the popular *Star Wars* franchise. The game was released in 2011 and was the successor to a similar game, *Star Wars Galaxies*. The long history and active player base make *Star Wars: The Old Republic* a prime site for research on identity and avatars. As a field site, it offers a contrast to existing research focused on *World of Warcraft*, *Second Life*, and other well-known games. The two most stark contrast to other digital worlds is the long-running established lore of the Star Wars universe apart from the gaming world and the games emphasis on player choices. *Star Wars: The Old Republic* demonstrates a high level of customization in player avatars mostly because of what the players own in-game, such as houses and transportation (vehicles or animals). As a result, the customization of the avatar has a dizzying number of abilities, combinations, and outfits. These options allow for each player to have their own distinct appearance for their avatar and a chance to show off their in-game wealth by wearing expensive items.

Players often organize themselves into groups called guilds. Guilds can be broadly split into two categories those with narrow focuses and those with wide focuses. The former has the guild focus on one aspect of the game player-versus-player content,

player-versus-environment, etc. While the later type of guild chooses to engage in many aspects of the game rather than focusing on a singular aspect.

Chapter 1.3: Preliminary Research

As a semi-active player, I have played the game off and on since its release in 2011. However, during my official preliminary research, I established connections to a different community / guild in the game. This included several sessions of passive observation to witness guild recruitment tactics and participant observation in several focused group activities. In addition to an informal conversation with the leader of the guild, I conducted a preliminary informal interview and a tour around a player's home within the game world. I also spent time exploring the game's website including its discussion forums.

Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW: IDENTITY AND THE AVATAR

In this section, I review literature relevant to identity and avatars, starting with identity. Simply put identity is the combination of physical, social, and mental aspects that make up a person. In my own approach, I utilize the work of Tilly (1995) and Waggoner (2009), which are discussed further below. But first, I will discuss the other relevant literature and history of identity in Anthropology.

2.1: Identity in Anthropology

Identity has only been a focus within anthropology in the last several decades, but it does have roots that go back to the school of culture and personality emerging from students of Franz Boas in the 1920s. Culture and personality focused on socio-cultural enculturation and the idea that culture had to be learned and acquired (Meijl 2010:3). Margaret Mead (1961) and Ruth Benedict (1946) were early examples of this approach. The culture and personality school was important in anthropology as it extended the focus of the discipline from the group to the individual. In addition, the study of the relationship between culture and personality made many anthropologists familiar with the work of psychiatrists such as Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson. The influence of the latter's work on the 'ego-identity' of children is what introduced the concept of identity to Anthropology (Meijl 2010).

Ego-identity formation is the process through which an individual comes to terms and balances their psychobiological drives and the influences upon them originating from society. In other words, it is the process of balancing an individual's own needs and wants with what society expects of them (Erikson 1956). Under these sorts of terms, identity is simply a coherent sense of self that is the same as how an individual is

viewed by others. Continuity and sameness were tied together in Erikson's views despite developmental changes. In this definition, the psychological orientation of a person to a group is the most important part of identity formulation. This would lay the groundwork for the modern concept of identity in anthropology.

That groundwork is continued in the work of Ward Goodenough (1965) as he was among the first to use identity analytically in anthropology during the 1960s. The importance of Goodenough's work lies in the distinction that he drew between social and personal identity. This distinction proved to be an influence for some time. Of relevant note in his work, he noticed that some individuals would use multiple identities at once to deal with issues. He called these fused identities *social personas* (Goodenough 1965). Social personas are similar to recent contemporary understandings of identity. While Goodenough's work still has homogeneity and stability as core concepts of identity, social personas resemble the idea of projective identities used in my research in that they are a composite of multiple identities (Meijl 2010:4; Waggoner 2009).

In the 1960s, the concept of culture was under debate, specifically over how useful it is as an analytical tool. Clifford Geertz offers an important corrective focusing on the symbolic aspects of culture over the cognitive aspects (1973). The importance of Geertz to the conversation on identity in anthropology comes from his ideas on how culture is embodied through socio-cultural relationships this gave culture a fixed point from which to be worked from and caused an epistemological shift to the meaning of culture, symbols, and identity (Meijl 2010:5).

Starting in the 1970s, identity became more important to Anthropology. Discussions led to individual identity being separated from collective identity. Individual identity was no longer considered a reflection of the collective (Meijl, 2010:7). From this there were two responses. The first pulled from psychology and integrated more with ideas and terminology related to self. The other splintered, looking at various aspects of identity, gender, ethnicity, and nationalism. Whereas before the understanding of identity was that it was coherent, now it is understood to be diverse and multifaceted. That a culture does not speak with one voice but many. It is understood that culture is not static, but it is dynamic (Wright 1998). The issue then with this new view of identity is that it is elusive and at times vague. But despite that, this view of identity has become a part of both cognitive anthropology and social psychology (Meijl, 2010:8).

Stuart Hall situates this idea of identity as a sort of central point from which all identities an individual might have been connected. However, Hall prefers to describe it as a point between sutures (Hall 2011). This sort of identity is a never-ending process of construction and as such the term *identification* may be more accurate. What is important for this thesis is that Hall's views of identity complement those of Waggoner's, as will be further expanded upon below.

2.2 Applying Identity to Digital Worlds

According to Boellstroff et al (2012) an avatar is anything that allows a person to be embodied in a digital world. An avatar is a 3D model for which a user is given certain options by the developer to customize. While the level of how in-depth customization varies from one digital world to the next, it is a core component of digital worlds that there is the option, even if it is only changing a few lines of text. By giving the user the

ability to customize their likeness in-game, we can begin to see why players grow attached to their avatar. It lies within the fact that the user is given control over how they are embodied within a digital world. The avatar becomes a suture under Hall's terms for identity (Hall 2011). But it is also important to note that the avatar is not necessarily a direct reflection of one's immediate physical identity. Instead, avatars can allow a user to present themselves differently than how they are normally.

Questions of what the avatar is and how avatars tie into identity are relatively new. Early work on cybersociality dates to van Gelder's 1985 article, "The Strange Case of the Electronic Lover." As Boellstorff (2015) notes, van Gelder focuses on the meeting of virtual identity with physical identity, specifically situations where one is unaware that they are interacting with a virtual identity that does not reflect the person's physical identity. For example, a psychiatrist named Alex presented himself to others as 'Joan' and participated in an early online forum, where Alex built relationships as Joan. Others were unaware that virtual Joan was also Alex the psychiatrist. Thus, we can see the split and tensions between avatar and creator identities. Some people would only see Joan and others would only see Alex. While Boellstorff (2015) only makes a brief mention of this early work by Van Gelder (1985), it is a relevant demonstration of the separation of identity that can occur between an avatar and a person.

Nardi (2010) approaches the question of the engagement of players in an interesting way developing a theory of aesthetic experience. Player actions through their avatar enrich and influence them (Nardi 2010: 41). Nardi argues that players are participating in a work of art, adding to it while also experiencing it. Nardi's perspective

are valuable for understanding what keeps players engaged in digital worlds long enough to get attached to their avatars.

By contrast to the research above, Boellstorff (2015) examines identity in relation to avatars through the lens of selfhood. He details the unique interactions that one can have with an avatar, and how the avatar can change the way one views themselves or even better reflects a player's identity than their physical self. The value of this lies directly in the thoroughness of Boellstorff's approach, highlighting the various aspects of the avatar and how it can in fact interact with players.

As mentioned in the definition of digital worlds above, a player's avatar is not alone in digital worlds. They share those worlds with other users' avatars, as well as an array of non-player characters (NPCs), animals, and other beings. Sharing these worlds, users are generally encouraged and incentivized to work together, allowing groups and communities to form. While there are earlier examinations of digital worlds like *Everquest* by T.L. Taylor (Taylor 2006), it is better to start with something slightly more recent as it was more focused on avatars and less on the spectacle of digital worlds. Especially important here is Celia Pearce's experiences with the Uru diaspora. Her book, *Communities of Play* (2009) provides a both fascinating and valuable account of how a community that formed in a particular digital world, can survive the loss of its digital world. In this case, the Uru diaspora moved from *URU: Beyond Mist* to both *Second Life* and *There.com*. While this is less about the avatar itself and more about the community, there would be no community without avatars that represent individual identities in these worlds (reflecting Goodenough's distinction between the social and personal). There are digital artifacts that they replicate and practices that they carry out

through their avatars in each of the different worlds resulting in a fictive ethnicity (Boellstorff et al 2012: 163). The importance here is not only the circumstances of the Uru diaspora but also how Pearce reaches outside of the game world and influences the publishers of said worlds, including helping restore previously shut down digital worlds (Pearce 2009). Pearce was able to reach out to the developers of Uru and act as a convincing authoritative voice for the Uru diaspora, making a successful case for the developers to reinvest in the Uru digital world. Pearce also highlights an interesting aspect of avatars; she acknowledges the avatar as a separate entity from herself, going as far as to credit her avatar as a co-author in her work.

The question of group dynamics and identity is an important aspect to consider in this work and is explored in Chen's book '*Leet Noobs*' (2011). Though it approaches online communities and digital worlds with the goals of instructional technology, the ethnographic methods render it familiar making the observations made by Chen valuable to this work. Chen is specifically looking at an 'expert player group,' specifically a raiding guild. The raiding guild is a community that participates in a specific activity, raiding, within the game that requires a higher degree of coordination and skill. In Chen's analysis the skill aspect of the community is emphasized but is of lesser importance than the chance to see what can cause a community in one of these digital worlds to come apart and what holds them together to this research. Chen can provide excellent insight into the inner workings of these communities, as before he was a researcher he was a player and able to adopt an emic point of view.

While not as detailed as the rest of the literature, Geraci and Recine (2014) examined the influence that *Star Wars: The Old Republics'* political philosophy has on

players with some valuable insight into player/avatar identity. The game is deeply rooted in Star Wars films, and therefore the themes and tones of Star Wars, especially the political themes of good and evil, democratic and autocratic values. Before they can begin playing players have to choose to join a faction. In the game, as in the films, Jedi and Sith factions have political views which shape the experience of players. According to the authors, the Empire is conceptualized in the game as leaning toward totalitarianism, while the Republic is more in line with enlightened republicanism (Geraci and Recine 2014).

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Beyond the virtual world of avatars, Tilly (1995) offers a useful definition for the research presented here. Tilly argues that, "identity itself is an actors experience of a category," (1998:456) breaking it down into several nested concepts including: actors, category, transaction, tie, role, network, group, organization, and finally identity itself. Each concept ties into and builds up the following one. 'Actors' are any living bodies that human bodies can attribute attention and intention to. 'Category' is a set of actors who are distinguished by a single criterion, either simple or complex. 'Transaction' is communication between actors. 'Ties' are where participants exchange shared meanings, memories, rights, and obligations. 'Role' is a bundle of ties attached to a single actor. A 'network' is a homogeneous set of ties among three or more actors. 'Group' is meeting networks and category. An 'organization' is a group in which one actor can speak for the rest. Finally, "identity itself is an actor's experience of a category, tie, role, network, group, or organization, coupled with a public representation of that experience;" the public representation takes the form of a shared story, a

narrative (Tilly 1995: 7). This definition is useful for providing a framework to define Gee's three forms of identity discussed earlier. Specifically, it helps understand what goes into projective identities.

While from outside the discipline of anthropology Waggoner (2009) looks at identity from a place of enthusiasm and personal interest. As discussed above, he borrows three theoretical constructs from Gee to do so: real-world identity, virtual world identity, and projective identity. Each of these emphasizes a specific spatial orientation around which individual identities are experienced. They should not be seen as definitive of how each player experiences the space, but conceptual domains in which we can try to understand the experiences of gamers. Real-world identity is defined by our profession, gender, age, religious leanings, etc. Virtual identity is created in-game; the avatar itself as, the culmination of options presented by the developer of the game and selected by the player. As discussed above, the projective identity is the mixture and in between of both real and virtual; it is the middle ground, the liminal space. In many ways projective is akin to Haraway's cyborg (Haraway 1991), creating a political space between worlds for political and social action. However, as my discussed below suggests my informants resist such positionalities. Instead, I use projective identities to examine these hybrid spaces between categories as it better reflects the data. These definite categories are useful for parsing and thinking about how identity functions concerning video games, even if the lines between where one starts and the others end can be blurry at times. Tilly's definition of identity is useful because it helps us separate identity into categories that can be more easily examined ethnographically in a virtual world. The physical and virtual identities can have distinct aspects that come together in

the projective identity. In contrasting Waggoner's work with my own, he focused solely on single-player roleplaying games so the avatars he is discussing are alone and never interacting with others. Any sort of community that is formed by the user in Waggoner's work is removed from the world that their avatar inhabits.

While Waggoner's method of adapting Gee's theoretical constructs is useful for understanding identity regarding virtual worlds it is important to acknowledge that identity is far from singular or static. When I refer to real, virtual, or projective identity I do not dismiss the multiplicity of identity only to simply and think of them more of as categories. As well as to keep in line with those theoretical constructs. In fact, interviews highlight the different ways that each category is experienced by players, and only somewhat hint at what we might term a truly cyborg identity (see discussion of 'Maul' below).

Chapter 3: METHODS

The research was to take place in three phases beginning in August 2021 and concluding In December of 2021. While the time frame did remain in place the majority of the plan had to be heavily adapted to be more flexible.

Table 1: Initial projected schedule

	Recruitment	Diary	Participant observation	Interview	Discourse Analysis
Phase 1 8/23/2021- 10/8/2021	Initial Recruit ment		ongoing		ongoing
Phase 2 10/8/2021- 11/26/2021	Snowball Sampling	Initiated	Ongoing	Set one	ongoing
Phase 3 11/26/2021- 12/8/2021		Completed	Ongoing	Set two	ongoing

3.1 Recruitment

Initial contact with participants took more time and effort than attempting to simply approach a group such as a guild. For example, I intended to put up recruitment advertisements on community forums and in the general chat of the game. These would have provided details about the research and how participants will be compensated for their time. Compensation offered for their participation consisted of in-game currency.

However, as this proved less productive I was approached a guild and once a part of that guild I recruited members from it with the hope that I would be able to snowball sample (Morgan 2008) my way into working with other individuals they know outside of the guild.

Recruitment was supposed to take place during phase one of the research but proved difficult as players were wary of committing to being a part of the study as well as being subject to a scam seeking personal information. Thus, initial attempts to recruit outside of the game were met with suspicion and dismissal. Additionally, the amount of compensation I offered was not sufficient to entice players and elicited sarcasm. While I had expected some level of this and budgeted additional time in my schedule for such difficulties, I underestimated how problematic getting my foot in the door would be. Attempts to advertise for the study were a failure as a result of an error in the email address in the initial ad. This made the community on the forum suspicious of me to the degree that no one responded to the advertisement, even after a quick correction.

Recruitment was more successful once I was recruited into a guild as a player and had access to their discord server. Once on the server voice channel I could personally speak with players and recruit them that way. Still recruitment proved difficult as many guild members were unable to fit the study into their schedule. Snowball sampling was attempted as well but it simply didn't work (Morgan 2008). Guild members would often show interest but were unable to participate. The length and amount of involvement of individual participants in the study was accordingly adjusted. As a result, over the course of the research period I worked intensively with three primary participants instead of four.

3.2 Diary methods

Diary methods also proved difficult to establish. Participants were asked to keep a diary related to their play sessions within the digital worlds that they are currently occupying (Hillman et al 2016). In these, they would reflect on decisions they make regarding their avatar, in-game purchases, and decisions they make that reflect the identity of their in-game character. For participating the player would have been compensated with in-game currency as mentioned before. The aim of this was to gather data even when I was not immediately present and document guild and player activity. The target number for the concurrent number of diaries being recorded at any time was between two and four hours, hopefully from players who engage with the game in diverse ways. Players who play alone and players who are part of communities are the two broad categories that I sought to include. This would have provided insight from the participants from various angles of engagement and less filtered by my presence. It would have also addressed how a community is maintained during gameplay, supplementing participant observation. All participants declined to take part in recording a diary for the study. It proved to be too much work for too little compensation. This along with scheduling conflicts ensured that this approach had to be removed from my methodology, relying instead on participant observation and other methods to fill in gaps.

3.3 Interviews

I conducted initial open-ended interviews (Boellstorff et al 2012) with three members of a guild, each of which having been with the guild for differing amounts of time and serving different roles within the guild. Each participant was interviewed two

separate times. The first set of interviews occurred during initial recruitment and primarily focused on the game itself with topics including: how long they have been playing, opinions on the game, and history with the community of *Star Wars: The Old Republic*, as well as other virtual worlds that they may participate in.

At the end of the study, the second set of interviews occurred and focused upon the avatar and the player's relationship with them. The following questions were raised during this set of interviews: What is important about the avatar to them? How did they decide on the name for the avatar? Is the avatar a unique identity located within only *Star Wars: The Old Republic* or does it exist as an identity in other places? What do they think of the avatars of others? How does the avatar change the experience that they have within the virtual world? If they are part of a guild, then the interview will also focus on that. What caused them to join? What do they know about the guild's history? What keeps them together? These interviews allowed me to address my research questions about guild structure and identity, as well as to gain a clearer understanding of what it takes to create a community in a virtual world and what keeps it together. The interviews I conducted were brief but informative. I also had smaller informal interviews with other guild members that I had a chance to speak with either as a part of being recruited or during the participant observation.

3.4 Participant observation

Throughout phases one and two, active participant observation consisted of engaging in guild activities and regular gameplay (Boellstorff et al 2012). While I was unsure of what the guild activities would include, it ended up being a moot point as none of the scheduled guild events or activities fit within my schedule. While I was not able to

take direct part in guild specific events, I was able to observe the scheduling for and type of events they were. These events were mostly participation in player versus environment challenges (called Operations), exploring certain areas of the game world for rewards, crafting competitions, and pet shows.

Like the discussion about a player's death above, a typical moment in game play might be described like this:

Upbeat music plays, laughter and insults merge with the sounds of speeders or whatever beast some Sith has decided to tame. I stand among the crowd leaning against one of the banisters next to the banking terminal watching the show. A guild recruiter gives their spiel while dancing and showing off their portable party sphere. Another person is announcing that they are looking for a buyer of specific goods. Another pair of voices debate the merits of the Sith code and what the future will look like for the Empire.

While larger more focused events may be a part of guild cohesion and purpose, what the individuals within that guild are doing is just as important. Seeing what they do with their time and what limitations or restrictions they face provides incredible insight into game play, identity and the avatar.

Participant observation was planned for three to four times a week and was to last at a minimum of three hours and a maximum of six hours. The initial parameters proved to be too rigorous to fit the schedules of the participants and during the period of the study I had to reduce the number of hours and sessions planned. As a result, 7 hours were spent conducting participant observation with focal individuals, 21 hours

were spent in discourse analysis, and an additional 37 hours were spent in regular gameplay alongside players outside of official guild events.

3.5 Discourse Analysis

I define discourse analysis as both observation of ongoing dialogue in my chosen field site and critical reflection upon the resulting text. This involved organizing the various discursive moments, identifying themes and analysis of those themes in relationship to my research questions. In this case, I mostly relied on the shared chat space of players at the fleet areas (central gathering points) for both Sith and Republic affiliated players, and noting relevant topics as they occur.

I intended to utilize discourse analysis in two ways. The first was to examine official and unofficial forums related to the virtual world involved in this research. Official forums only reflect one facet of being in these virtual worlds, which is why I also looked at unofficial forums. These unofficial forums exist usually on larger platforms such as Reddit (<https://www.reddit.com/r/swtor/>) and Discord. In scope they can be focused on the virtual world as a whole or can focus on a particular aspect or persons within it. For analyses I found that the unofficial Reddit was the most active and informative of the forums.

The second use of discourse analysis involved chat logs and conversations that occur within the game play during participant observation, both casual and formal conversations. By casual conversation refers to discourse that occurs spontaneously during play. Formal discourse in this context would mean the discourse that occurs during planned events where communication is more vital and can determine success or failure in said planned event, such as a raid.

I had planned to collect the discussions on these public forums by copying them to a word document. But this proved to be unnecessary as I could simply capture screenshots. Casual chat logs were collected in the same manner. During gameplay and participant observation I used random spot checks scheduled every thirty minutes to collect general chat logs. The general chat is where most discussion and most messages between players takes place.

Regular observation of the guild specific chat was also planned in between interviews and participant observation. However, the guild chat proved to be far less active and productive than expected. I was looking for discussions by guild members, and exclusively between guild members. Actions taken by the higher-ranking guild members, such as the guild master, can be observed here as well as promotions, demotions, and new members being added. Importantly for guild formation, I wanted to use this space to, observe how new members of the guild are treated as it is critical to understanding how rapport is established in the guild structure. A guild is nothing without its members, and there is little keeping a new member from leaving one guild to join another. As the guild chat was less active, I relied instead on interviews and participant observation to collect data.

Chapter 4: DISCUSSION

The schedule and structure I had in mind going into this study did not survive very long. This is mostly due to recruitment being far more piecemeal and spontaneous than what was planned. My initial contact with the community of SWTOR proved to be unproductive. Outside of the game I posted an ad for the study on the SWTOR subreddit hoping to garner interest and recruit a few players. I made a mistake in the email address contained in the post and this led to the residents of the subreddit following up on the email address and deciding that I was not who I said I was. Sufficient to say I did not get any interest in the study through this method. What proved far more effective was being recruited by an existing guild that needed more members. After being recruited by the guild I had the chance to speak with the leader of the group and was able to speak with him about the history of the guild and a tour of the guild's ship.

Fortunately, the guild I joined was open and cooperative to the idea of study. But even with a foot in the door, recruitment was still difficult as finding players with schedules that worked with mine was arduous.

In discussions of the avatar, it was an interesting trend that two out of my three were informants eager to distance themselves from the idea of relating their character with their real-world identity. Despite this it was clear that participants and other players interchangeably referred to themselves through both physical bodies and virtual bodies. A trend noticed by Waggoner (2009) and still relevant here. This reluctance may be due to the public view of massive multi-player on-line games as addictive and that those

who player may have lost the ability to discern their physical selves from their digital selves (Oggins and Sammis, 2012).

Projective identity in SWTOR is guided by the need to adhere to the ideals of *Star Wars* to try and make that world realistic. This can manifest as an attempt to mold their virtual identity to suit the world of *Star Wars* in this case, or to what they believe makes sense within a specific virtual world. There is of course the possibility for a third option the person who rejects the presented world and does everything they can to make a projective identity that is out of place with the rest of their peers. While I did not work directly with anyone like this it was not hard to see examples of this. A player who cosplays as DC's Harley Quinn for example would be rebelling against the digital world of SWTOR. But even then, they are still constrained by the customization options in SWTOR.

Of the participants that I observed, the player that goes by Maul would be an example for the former while the latter is best exemplified by Ben. Maul fits himself into the world by understanding Sith philosophy and his interest in it fuels his choices in SWTOR producing his projective identity. While Ben is more interested in placing his real-world experiences into the world of SWTOR. During our conversations Ben noted that it didn't make sense for our characters to map out areas ourselves when the areas we were going to were supposed to be well mapped. Ben also pointed out that often the physical fitness of a character's appearance didn't suggest their abilities to perform certain feats.

Below, I examine the results of my different methods and foci. Starting with guild structure and an analysis of the discourse, before turning to interviews and participant

observation. Finally, I offer discussion of my player follows with the three focal informants before offering some conclusion based upon my research questions.

4.1 Guild structure

As part of this study, I joined the discord of the guild and received in-game mail messages which allowed me to observe the nature of the guild's structure. This structure included the scheduling, social ranks, and more generally communication between guild members about a variety of subjects both relevant to the game not so much. The guild has members in both Imperial and Republic factions.

As for how the guild relates to the participants of this study, Maul holds a prominent position among the guild and runs a specific section. Ben held no specific position in the guild other than that they were not in the introductory position that most are placed in when joining the guild. A third informant named Fett was at the time of the study also in a similar Guild position, just above a new recruit. Later, after the study had finished, they reached out to me showing that they had been promoted (recruiter) with a specialized title.

Guilds give a needed in-game structure that provides players with the tools to create a community. That community is both within the game and in other platforms the guild occupies like Discord. The cohesion of guilds is maintained through participation and communication. As long as a guild is active and cohesive it can provide a community and enhance the projective identity of the players who are a part of the guild.

4.2 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis was a useful tool for determining common themes of both in game and discussion board conversations. In particular, I was directed by my research questions to identify themes as they related to guild structure and individual identity. While there were plenty of topics that were identified during analysis of the many texts produced by the guild and game play, only a few were frequent in number.

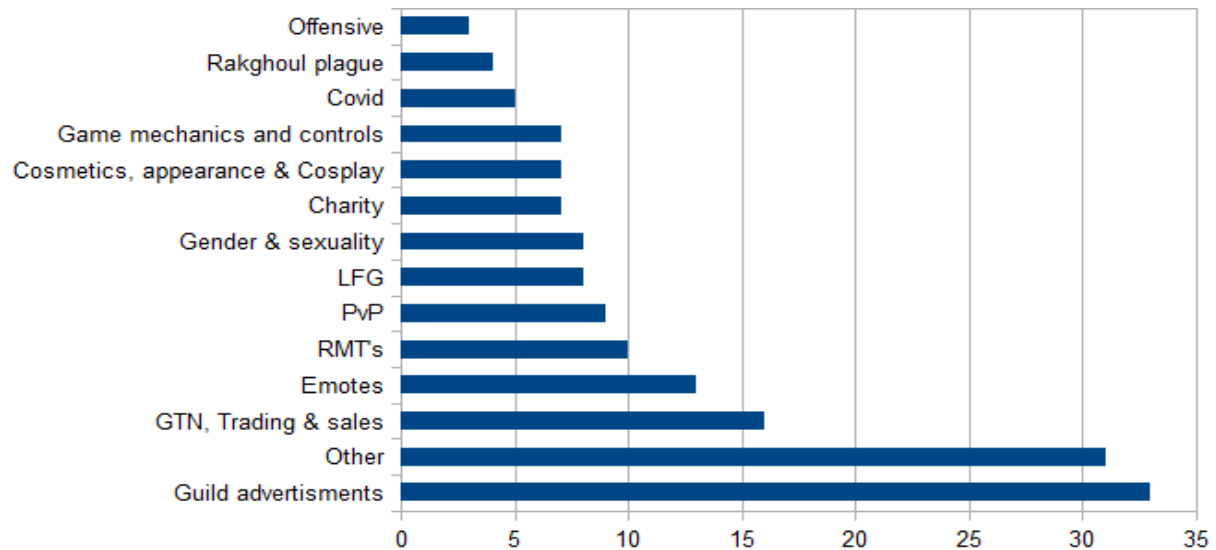


Figure 1: A chart depicting relevant topics that were observed during discourse analysis and the number of times they occurred. LFG stands for looking for group, PvP stands for player versus player, RMT stands for real money trader, GTN stands for Galactic trade network. The full list of topics and their definitions can be found in the appendix.

Figure 1 summarizes the topics that I identified during discourse analysis (see Appendix A for complete detailed listing). It can be clearly seen that the most frequent topics in general communication are guild recruitment, trading among each other and emotes. The category “other” including many different one-off topics, items that appeared once but were unrelated to the other major categories. Emotes are of greater relevance to the goals of this study. Emotes in this context are a means by which players can communicate with each other. An example might be that a player can type

the command '/wave' and their avatar will wave either in general to all of those around them or at a specific person if the player selected them before using the command. These are in-game expressions linking the real-world attitudes and experiences of the player with the avatar, and through the avatar to other players.

The next several topics, RMT's, PvP, and LFG all fall under certain kinds of gameplay. RMT's, or real money traders, are either players or organizations that trade in-game currency for real world money. This sort of trading is specifically against the rules but it still persists in many virtual worlds due to the willingness of players to spend real world money and risk breaking the rules to speed up their avatar's progression. RMT was a common feature of in-game chats. Players who engage accept these sorts of deals risk problems with the moderation teams and developers risking bans and the like. But players still engage in RMT because it saves them time. Some players would prefer to skip gathering money by slower means provided in the game. Time and effort are both a factor in real lives and digital ones here.

Discussions about PvP (Player versus player) reflected either looking for players for battles or matches, boasting, the current status of PVP content within the game, and etiquette. Players place a great deal of importance on both their own abilities as players and their avatars' powers in PvP. LFG short for looking for group is something that leans into PVE (player versus environment) which has players working together to combat computer-controlled enemies. Each of these topics demonstrate how the discourse of SWTOR allowed players to develop their projective and real identity through play within the guild and game structure.

Gender and sexuality were a small but consistent part of the topics discussed by players. These discussions included debates about gender to discussion of sexuality and parodies of erotic roleplay involving their avatars. The anonymity of avatars and the internet in general seemed to encourage players to explore these topics. However, the difference in this case is that the avatar that a player creates recontextualize the way the discussion and exploration develop. An example of this during a player who was enraged in a parody of erotic roleplay choose to focus on an aspect of the species of their avatar, the head tentacles of the Twi'lek they were playing.

Asking for help and being charitable, such as the death of a player discussed in the introduction, are a common practice. There were many such examples within the game. However, whether the request for charity is fulfilled or if the offer is genuine is another matter as charity could also be used to trick others for their own benefit.

Cosmetic, appearance, and cosplay were a surprisingly small part of the discussions among players considering how visually diverse players have made their avatars. Generally, when brought up in conversation with players it was about how to achieve a specific appearance. For example, there was a player asking for advice on which helmet would most make him look like Darth Vader. Overall, what stood out in these discussions was that appearance could be a collaborative experience. While it wasn't a part of discussion in forum and on chat, I also observed the efforts of players to put forth cosplay, a standout example was a player who had put together a Harley Quinn (a Batman character) cosplay.

Game mechanics and controls was mainly about players asking for assistance with how to interface with the virtual world in SWTOR. What this discussion highlights

the most is that the connection between virtual and physical is not perfect and that projective identity is influenced by the imperfect connection.

Covid and the Rakghoul plague were topics that were discussed independently but also drew comparisons by players. The Rakghoul plague is a virulent infection that spreads amongst players in the game and is common in SWTOR as well as its predecessor games. Some jokingly referring to the Rakghoul plague as space covid. In game the Rakghoul plague is a disease that can be spread from player to player. Once infected the player's avatar suffers increasing negative effects until eventually the avatar dies and infects all other avatars around them. This a minor annoyance at most since the avatar will be restarted in a matter of moments. Since it is easy to get the vaccine for the Rakghoul plague having a character die from the plague happens out of ignorance of where to get the vaccine, or sometimes by choice not to get it in the first place. Ironically, the real and virtual worlds collide in this basic aspect.

The topic I labeled offensive was for things like a specific username or offensive content in what players were saying. Often these were deliberately done to offend or provoke a response from others. While the exact nature of what they are doing doesn't matter for the context of this study what does matter is that they are engaging in the behavior at all. As this sort of behavior is completely rejecting any sort of projective identity, these players are, at least while engaging in this sort of thing, targeting other people for the purpose of their amusement. In these cases, the avatar and the virtual world is only a tool for them to provoke a response from others.

During my time and as shown above there were 30 separate guilds that advertised that they were recruiting new players. Some of these appeared more than

once during my observations. Their general message was always the same. They would announce who they were and what kind of guild they were advertising and the benefits of joining said guild. While the goal and overall structure remains mostly the same, each guild has its own style of phrasing recruitment. Though some recruitment is more personal with the recruiters simply approaching players who are not already in a guild. The guild that I worked with used a pre-written recruitment message that could be copied and pasted straight into the general chat. But the most relevant aspect in how these recruitment pitches were written in such a way that they make no distinction between a person's physical identity or virtual identity. They are addressed at the space of the third identity between digital and real. While there are still plenty of other topics that occurred during my observation they are of lesser importance.

4.3 Interviews

I conducted a total of six formal interviews over the course of the study. Two for each of the three participants. In the first session, my questionnaire focused on twelve questions and then in the follow-up there was an additional ten questions. The interviews ranged from nine to thirty-five minutes long. The planned method was to use the first set of interviews to inform the questions of the second set. The interviews proved to be far more direct than expected, branching out far less beyond the focus of the question. The longer more informal conversations during the participant observation proved to be more productive than the interviews. However, the first interview with the participant I've decided to call Maul opened the door for discussions on how they approached the way they played and why they chose their character. They identify strongly with the Sith code and Sith philosophy in the game and want their character to

reflect that protective identity. This player was also the focus of my participant observation and player follows and are discussed in greater detail below.

4.4 Participant Observation

While the participant observation did not touch every aspect of the ways to experience SWTOR it did cover much of the way players engage with the virtual world. This allows for some conclusions about how identity is manifested across the gameplay experience; that real, virtual, and projective identity can be found through gameplay. It is a limitation of this study that not every mode of participation within the game was explored. Inter-Player roleplay for example was observed elsewhere but was not a part of the participant observation. Far more important, the three main components of identity under Waggoner's (2009) definition can be observed.

For participant one, projective identity laid mostly within the Sith code and philosophy and ensuring those were reflected in his character/story. They also found that demonstrating expertise in the game was important, specifically in player versus player environments.

For participant two, they were frustrated that the link between their physical self and digital was not stronger. They felt that the logic that would apply in the real world should also apply to digital worlds. Their physical self also affected their digital self in other ways as well, not having a strong internet connection meant that they would prefer to play characters that support a static playstyle, one that would not be hindered by such an internet connection. While this limitation was no longer the case, they still prefer these sorts of characters.

Participant three placed a great deal of their projective identity in how their character appeared, pointing out specific armor sets and companions that they wanted as a part of their character. They also wore expensive outfits that needed real world money to be purchased at exorbitant prices through the Galactic Trade Network. They also had the easiest time roleplaying as mentioned before they complimented their in-game lines with follow-up points, talking as if they were the character. Often, they would take the time to explain their motivations for their characters' actions within the game.

4.5 Participant Follows

Over the course of the study each of the three participants had three sessions. During these sessions I played alongside them in several in-game activities. These can be broadly categorized as player versus player content, cooperative content, and some game prompted role-playing. The three participants and myself are all part of the same guild as this was how I met them. When I was recruited into the guild, I was given a tour of the guild ship, a shared space for the guild to meet and decorate. Below, combining interviews and participant observation, I focus on three players that were the focus of my study.

Participant 1 – Maul

I conducted two interviews with participant one, Maul and had three observation sessions with him. Maul's avatar was a Sith pureblood described in game a "force sensitive species of red skinned humanoids. The term "Sith pureblood" is now used to distinguish between those descended from the species and the order itself" (Star Wars the Old Republic 2011). His avatar was dressed in either in black robed armor accented

with red highlights or ornate white and gold robes. Maul's mount of choice was a blue lizard. Of the participants, I spent the most time with Maul had not limited the amount of time of our sessions until after the first couple of sessions. Maul is one of the longest serving members of the guild and so had the most insight into how it functions and has changed over its relatively short life span. He also holds a leadership position within the guild specifically over the player versus player aspect of the guild and recruitment of new members for the guild. During my time with Maul, we participated in many aspects of the game: player versus player, player versus environment, and story-based encounters. But it was the first category that Maul has the most passion for. Together with two other players we would engage in team battles with four people on each side. Maul would attempt to coordinate but according to him since we were only participating in casual player versus player none of the players would take anything very seriously. While we never participated in anything other than the casual level of PvP we did engage in various game types. Most of these had larger teams and would involve accomplishing specific objectives like getting to and holding a specific spot or capturing an item and bringing it back to a goal post.

Participant 2 -Fett

Fett was a player who was just returning to the game after an exceedingly long hiatus, my sessions with them were by far the brusquest. We moved through everything very quickly and the entirety of our sessions were engaging in SWTOR's story content. Which meant lots of structured roleplay. In such roleplay we were given options, typically three distinct ways in which we could have our characters respond to the story that is happening around them. During these he would occasionally explain why they

were making those choices and additional follow-up responses speaking as if they were the character. In dialogue players are given a choice between three options for what their avatar will say during a conversation with NPCs (non-player characters) and these are generally summations of what they will say rather than line by line dialogue. So, an option for a player to choose might be presented as “No, I won’t do that,” the avatar will say that and then elaborate on the chosen dialogue. Fett would often read out the initial presented dialogue before selecting as if he were speaking to the NPC’s. I only saw Fett use a single avatar during my time with him. His avatar was a heavily armored, in a style reminiscent of Mandalorians, human woman with a jetpack and a pistol. While traveling Fett would use an orange and white speeder, a kind of motorcycle-esque hovercraft with three thrusters.

Participant 3 – Ben

Ben was also a long-term player of SWTOR and during their sessions we focused on PVE and story content. While playing with Ben he used two different avatars the first was human woman with pigtails in blue and gold armor with a cape that used a double-sided lightsaber. Other times the first avatar wore an outfit consisting of a tank top, skirt and sandals. His second avatar was a human man also dressed in the same blue and gold armor with a cape. While traveling their mount of choice was a lizard or canine creature. During our sessions we had long conversations about the intricacies and history of SWTOR. Specifically, we focused on how things had changed and how the player versus environment content functions. Another topic that was of repeated note was that of gaps in realism as it related to the game experience. Specifically, he was interested in realism as it related to character appearance, or what a character

should be able to do/ have at any given moment, and naming conventions. Specifically, Ben believed a character's appearance should match what they can do. For Ben that meant that avatars whose abilities are physically demanding in nature should be physically fit. By contrast, there are no such limitation on avatars in SWTOR players are free to choose whatever body type that want and it has no reflection on ability. As for naming conventions he felt that names that either fit into the Star Wars universe or from real life were the only appropriate names for avatars. As such Ben designed his characters around these ideas.

Crafting was also an early topic of discussion with this participant, especially how it works and supplemented one's character. Crafting refers to the process of creating a character's items from raw materials. Ben approached crafting as a tool to further his avatar. He is knowledgeable about the practice and was happy to explain how crafting was a necessity rather than something he wanted to do. Interactions with other players and how they treat each other was a recurring theme that was discussed how players are expected to already know any sort of role that they are applying for in a group and how there is little room to learn how to perform a role. Specifically in this aspect the role of healer and tank were the two common roles discussed, as they are the least popular and most difficult to perform as well as being the most vital in group play. In most multi-player games, the tank protects the rest of the group and takes damage while the healer makes sure that the rest of the group stays alive. For most when they choose to participate in digital worlds like SWTOR these roles are a matter of choice. But for Ben when he first started playing his internet connection was a slow so he had to choose options that would allow for lag, when a player's connection to the game is not fully in

sync. Ben's choice in roles is still defined by this, he prefers options that allow for his character to stay in a single place like being the healer.

Chapter 5: CONCLUSION

This study aimed to answer how digital worlds interact and affect our identities. While a fully satisfactory answer is far beyond the scope of this of this thesis the answers I did find shed further light onto my primary questions. Below I review my research questions and the conclusion I drew.

5.1 How do Avatars expand and change the user's identity? What does the avatar mean to the player?

The ability of the player to mold and craft the appearance of their chosen avatar within a certain set of boundaries has an undeniable effect on players. The division offered between joining the Empire or the Republic is a minor cosmetic for some, but for others, it holds political importance and value that may be acted upon through the digital world. Players spend extensive amounts of time customizing and tweaking outfits. But more specifically beyond the actions taken in-game, what I sought to understand is how avatars change the way players think about their identity, how the appearance of their avatar or belonging to a certain guild community influences their actions or the actions of others. In other words, how can projective identity as used by Waggoner (2009) apply *Star Wars: The Old Republic*?

For example, my first participant in this study, Maul, is very fond of the Sith code and Sith philosophy in general. The code is emblematic of their approach:

“Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me.”

The main thrust of his views on the code is that it is honest and focused on self-improvement. When compared to the Jedi he claims that they are hypocritical and thus the Sith are in the moral right. He finds the code and culture compelling but isn't blind to its faults.

To see how projective identity is at play here we must examine its two components: the real participant and the virtual world. In this example, Maul's interpretation of the Sith code and what that means in game terms influences how he approaches and sees the game. It influences his player identity as he moves through the game attempting to fulfill what he sees as best version of the role he has chosen. This is reflected primarily through his choice in appearance and story choices. His appearance choices are tailored to what he feels fits the ideal of Sith, and how it presents to others that his character is a Sith. But he has also chosen a Sith pureblood as his 'species' further cementing his idea for his character. When presented with choices in game he has followed his interpretation of the Sith code and sticking to that.

While the choices that can be made in SWTOR are set within predetermined limits of the game, it is the fact that players can make them and the combination that they chose makes a unique projective identity. This connects the player to the avatar in important ways, as both an aesthetic set of choices, but also through the practices of gameplay as they act as the character.

5.2 How does the avatar transcend the confines of a single digital world?

An avatar is intrinsically tied to the digital world that it is created in for the most part. However, there are cases where one can transfer their avatar to another digital world. But as my lack of research findings illustrate, this is the exception rather than the

rule. In those rare circumstances players work to recreate a single avatar throughout multiple virtual worlds. For Waggoner (2009), this suggests a relationship between our virtual identity and that which we project onto other spaces. What causes this sort of attachment to the avatar? Some will attribute actions to their avatar rather than themselves, whether it is something simple like an avatar slipping off a cliff or co-authorship of a book in the case of Celia Pearce (Pearce 2009). How does the avatar gain agency? How does it come alive? How do virtual and physical identities mix to create projective ones in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*?

I was not able to answer this question completely during the study, though I was certainly able to observe the blurring of lines between player and avatar. Specifically, when participants acknowledged the avatar as a unique self they referred to the avatar in the first person. The main reason as to why this was so difficult to tease out of players is that there is a resistance to seeing the avatar as anything other than a game component. This resistance stems from a stigma placed on digital worlds by non-players suggesting that players are unable to differentiate the real worlds from the digital one; that gamers are completely addicted and cease to care about life outside of the digital realm (Oggins and Sammis, 2012). While this stigma was never directly addressed in my discussions with my participants the response from my questions were answered in such a way that implied that they thought I was asking about such stigmatized topics. During initial questions about identity and how they see the game participants would hesitate in their answers or would answer in such a way that would affirm that they understand the difference between reality and the game. While none of

this was directly said avoiding these sorts of stigma hung over the initial parts of interviews and colored participant responses.

Perhaps long-term research project, focused more on the real-world identities of players as well as their virtual and projected selves would allow further considerations of how these are and are not maintained as distinct categories. Maybe there are hybrid and cyborg form that a more in-depth study of gamer groups could explore. These are certainly rich spaces for future research.

5.3 What does it take to create a community within a digital world, and how can they survive moving from one game world to another?

How do communities form in these digital worlds, how do they persist, why do they crumble, and how do they extend beyond their originating digital world? Players and by extensions avatars are far from alone in digital worlds as they form communities or guilds with fellow players. What causes these communities to form is the most important question here, but I also want to know what keeps a community alive? What is the relationship between a community's identity and that of the player and their avatar? These communities can be incredibly short-lived lasting mere days or can exist for decades surviving the death of the digital world where they were formed. The Uru diaspora (Pearce 2009) is an excellent case of the second point, where the bonds of the community were so strong they survived the closure of the digital world they originated and found new homes in other digital worlds. How does a community expand to more than a single digital world and what do they carry with them into these new digital worlds? What role does virtual and projective identity play with these community migrations?

While I couldn't fully answer this question during the time of my research, I did find partial answers as to how one creates and maintains longevity in an online community. The answer I heard from my participants was resoundingly 'kindness and understanding.' But other answers included good guild management. As one of my interviewees, Maul, explained regarding our guild "we're the role models that we want people to look up." By implication, a guild that works together and supports each other in making the experience in the digital world a better one is a guild that will last longer. Space to learn within guilds and tolerance of failure are also important. What is also implicit in these statements is that the guild must be active with things to do for their guild mates. From my time in the guild, I have observed that organization takes place mostly outside of the game through the guild's Discord server, where activities and schedules are posted. Discord is an online messaging application favored by the gaming community. While the forms used to communicate are different, from forums to the Discord platform, the content of this communication is very much in line what Pearce (2009) observed during her time with the Uru diaspora. It also explains the reluctance of player to accept my initial research queries.

Another aspect of the guild organization that contributes to projective identity is the ranking system. Members within the guild have ranks that denote their responsibilities and privileges. Within the Sith apprentice, Lord, Darth, and then Dark council member are the ranks from lowest to highest. Rank and the chance for promotion provides motivation besides being able to play the game as a group. It allows members to recognize each other, and their contribution of their projected identities to the community of the guild.

The conclusion that I have drawn from this study is that projective identity is an inescapable part of engaging in digital worlds. To what degree that projective identity and where the focus lays is what differs. Maul's focus on the lore and universe, Fett's focus on appearance and moment to moment immersion, and Ben's attempt to integrate his real-world logic into the digital one are all different manifestations of projective identity. I would also conclude that Waggoner's projective identity for single player games works just as well in massively multiplayer ones like SWTOR. However, the way those games and gaming are stigmatized also changes the way that players regard their projective identities. This change in view causes players who are normally comfortable with referring to themselves and their virtual counterpart interchangeably to rebuff ideas of merging real and virtual identities.

As for where future work is needed, with the number of guilds that engage the game in different ways it is easy to see that a great deal of more work can be done with guilds of varied experience levels or ones that have different foci. There are a number of topics and branches that can be explored in regards to projective identity, especially the role of kinesthetics. By this I mean the use of emotes and how a player uses their avatar's body to move and interact with the digital world they inhabit. The suspicion of players during the recruitment phase and general skepticism could be investigated further. Such as examining the prevalence of others attempting to steal accounts, in-game funds, or items and how that changes player perception of others. Digital worlds remain an expansive area where a great deal of work can be done.

APPENDIX

The full list of topics and categories revealed in discourse analysis can be found below organized by frequency occurrences from most to least.

16

GTN, Trading & Credits, Sales

GTN, short for Galactic Trade Network is the discussion on the method through which players can post items to be sold to other players at prices of their own discretion. Trading is as one might expect the trading done between players mostly declarations of intent to sell an item along with the price or desire to purchase a certain item along with asking for the price for it. Sales are the specific sort of trading that falls outside the normal sort of jargon that trading involves. Credits, their use, inflation, and restrictions on them due to the actions of RMT's and real-world money flooding the in-game economy.

13

Emotes:

By far the most prevalent topic in chat is the use of emotes. While their primary purpose is to elicit a physical or auditory action within the game, they are all tied together by the fact they are described in the chat where they are used, so most commonly in the general chat.

10

RMTS:

RMT or Real money traders were the next most prevalent topic and by this, I mean their advertisements offering to trade in real world currency for in game currency.

9

PvP:

Discussions of PVP or player versus player content was the third most discussed topic during my observations. This was either questions about trying to get other players involved in, or otherwise trash talk between players.

Mounts:

The appearance of mounts, animal, or vehicle while in a public space for the purpose of showing it off.

8

LFG:

Players looking for groups or guilds to join was the next most populous category, which had a very standardized and specific jargon to communicate in repeated messages.

Gender and Sexuality:

Gender was also a very lively topic among discussions, not necessarily in the number of times that it was discussed but the length of the discussion. Specifically, a conversation between several players where they argued over their definitions of gender was by and far one of the longest conversations that I observed during a discourse analysis session. Sexuality, specifically the discussion of player sexuality and erotic roleplaying was surprisingly common among the topics discussed by players.

7

Charity:

Charities and giveaways were another popular topic within the general chat, players either asking for charity or offering to giveaway large sums of in game currency or rare items.

Cosmetics, appearance & Cosplay:

Cosmetics & appearance specific discussion of appearance and options to customize appearance that do not involve cosplay. Cosplay was less a topic of discussion though it did come up, several players were discussing how to look like Darth Vader, but something that was displayed to other players by wearing certain outfits in public spaces.

game mechanics and controls

As to be expected the mechanics of how the game works was also a topic for discussion. The controls of the game and how to achieve specific actions with them.

5 Covid:

The topic of Covid was certainly present in discussions among players, jokes, and arguments about how effective the vaccine is or whether it is even real were the common topics when discussing Covid.

4 Rhakgoul plague:

The Rakghoul plague is an in-game disease that is incredibly virulent and allows players to infect each other. With the eventual consequences being death of the character unless they get the vaccine, though of course death in SWTOR is a minor inconvenience it is still something to be avoided. This has unsurprisingly drawn

comparisons to Covid and even automated systems on other websites flag notices about the Rakghoul plague as being related to covid.

3

The Eternal Order:

“The Eternal Order” a guild focusing on PVE/PVP/ and roleplaying. Crafting, leveling, you name it. They have a guild flagship and a Rishi headquarters. They are an active and social guild.

The True Sith Empire

“The True Sith Empire” a guild focusing on recruiting new active players, offering repair funds from their guild bank. Specifically call out that no commitments are required. There to make friends and have fun.

Offensive:

Behavior that was specifically designed to offend other players came up as character names and as specifically role playing.

Game story:

The story of the game is also a topic of discussion as one might expect, comparing experiences and discussing what they think will come next, critique as well.

Study Guild:

Study guild is for specific mentions of the guild that I am a part of, or when the guild chat was more active than the general chat. When recruiting they focused on help, perks, ops, and pvp. Veteran and new players.

Game events:

Game events that happen independently of the story of the players. For example, the emergence of the Rakghoul plague and the associated game-play events would be a game event.

2

Word games:

Word games, a specific word game came up a couple of times where players would attempt to insert the word Jawa into movie titles.

Wolf's Bane of Harbinger:

Wolf's Bane of Harbinger a guild focusing on recruiting any and all players. They are a long-established guild on both factions, play the way you want. Solo, pve, pvp whatever. No erotic roleplay. Also uses humor in their recruitment pitches after the first one.

Audio:

recorded instances when audio was particularly distinct or caused by a player, usually accompanied by an emote.

low pop:

recorded instances of extremely low population within the game world.

Scarlet four:

A small casual guild looking for patient, loyal, involved, and friendly folks. Clean chat channels imp and pub guild, full amenities. Discord as well.

Politics:

The discussion of current political events or political ideology. Almost exclusively about USA politics.

1

Character reactions:

Character reactions are less someone speaking in the chat and more the actual player moving in response to another player moving their avatar.

Controversy:

The discussion of controversy not related to SWTOR. In this case the conversation was about the, at the time recent, sexual harassment issues at another game company Activision-Blizzard

Cartel coins:

Cartel coins, the discussion on the premium in-game currency that can be bought with real money or earned through game play.

Wild Bunch:

“Wild Bunch” a guild focusing on recruiting any and all players they do not provide details in their pitch.

Republic Court:

“Republic Court” a guild focusing on recruiting they advertise themselves as a large dual faction guild on all English-speaking servers. Zeal set bonus (go find out what this is)

Professions:

Professions, an aspect of the game where players can gather certain items and then craft them into others.

Depravity:

“Depravity” a casual guild focusing on rebuilding their ranks, offering materials for endgame content, and leveling up.

Multitasking:

Multitasking, where players are both playing the game and doing something else at the same time mentioning it in chat.

Stats:

Stats, discussions on the specific stats and how they function within SWTOR.

Healers:

Healers, discussion on the role of healing that players can take on.

Chosen ones:

“Chosen Ones” a guild advertising for recruitment.

the darkness awaits:

“The Darkness Awaits” a guild focusing on conquests, heroics, flash points and operations. Looking for active players, full guild ship, xp bonus, and a discord server.

Guild invite:

Guild invite, being invited by a guild on a character that is currently not a part of one.

Win or Lose we Booze:

“Win or lose we booze” a guild that claims to be for boozier gamers and make dirty jokes in their advertisements. Strictly 18 years or older requirement for membership in the guild.

Republic Misfits:

“Republic misfits” a guild focusing on just hanging out and chilling, unclear if they are recruiting.

Agents of Anarchy:

“Agents of Anarchy” a guild focusing on recruiting using no details other than an offer to speak privately.

the Last remnants:

“The Last Remnants” a guild focusing on recruiting all players new and returning. Many perks (xp, rep, renown), flagship, regular scheduled ops and events. Play as you want casual or driven.

Heir to the empire:

“Heir to the empire”: a guild focusing on conquest ideal for new or passive players. Will help with gear and leveling.

SW ref:

SW ref is for direct references to other Star Wars media that hasn't already been accounted for.

Alt:

Alt or alternative, direct mentions of the use of alternative characters.

Outside coms:

Outside coms, communications from outside of the chat influencing it.

Game critique:

Game critique, self-explanatory critique of the way SWTOR is designed as a game.

You can't take the sky from me:

“You Can't Take The Sky From Me” a guild focusing on recruiting relaxed players.

Space pirates of havoc:

“Space Pirates of Havoc” a guild focusing on looking for active players that want to learn and do ops, will help gear and teach. Friendly fun environment. All perks and bonuses.

Anime:

Anime, the discussion of Japanese animation, specifically shows.

Voice actors:

Voice actors, discussion of the voice actors that play the part of characters within SWTOR.

Space cowboys:

“Space cowboys” a small casual guild looking for friendly players to chill with.

The Transcendent ones:

“The Transcendent one’s” a guild using private invitations only using the word join as an invitation.

Visual bugs:

Visual bugs, noting bugs that affect the way the world appears to players (specifically me in this case).

Roleplay:

Roleplay, spontaneous role play that occurred in the general chat.

Greetings:

Greeting, players greet each other in the public space of the general chat.

The Empire:

“The Empire” a guild recruiting using a one-word statement. “Join”

The Blood omen's

“The Blood Omen's” a guild focusing on recruiting players into their new guild. They are very aware of the misspelling in their name.

Directions:

Directions, players ask for directions to find places, items, or non-player characters.

Returning player:

Returning player, players who have announced that they have just recently returned to the game, this is mostly due to the announced expansion.

Phoenix coalition:

“Phoenix Coalition” a guild focusing on recruiting without providing details about their guild.

name change:

Name change, Player discussing or announcing that they have changed their name.

Guild recruitment:

Guild recruitment, guild attempting to recruit me into their guild while I'm doing discourse observation.

Temasek

“Temasek” a guild focusing on operations, pvp, and achievements. Caters to all players and works mostly through organizing events. Has a specific unified time zone (GMT+8)

Burn the land and boil the sea

“Burn the land and boil the sea” a guild that ‘does things’ and is vague in their advertising about themselves.

Hunters Moon:

Hunter’s Moon is a small casual guild with full xp bonuses and guild perks, and flagship.

Empire of old:

Empire of old is a guild that is looking for new players to become a pvp/pve guild. They are offering payouts and giveaways. They have big plans.

the sphere of influence:

The Sphere of Influence is another guild with a humorous pitch stating that they are the “sexiest new guild to join.”

misfits of the galaxy:

Misfits of the galaxy a guild that also focuses on using humor to recruit.

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