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One Self to Rule Them All:
A Critical Discourse Analysis of French-Speaking Players' Identity Construction in World of Warcraft

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This chapter provides a critical discourse analysis of French-Speaking players' personal and collective identity construction in World of Warcraft. Based on sixteen semi-structured interviews conducted online, we have analyzed how players introduce their avatars, the extent to which avatars correspond to or differ from players' real selves, and how players perceive and construct collective identity within their guilds. The study revealed that most players make use of avatar introduction as a rhetorical pretext to fabricate narratives of personal experiences related to their game practice. In addition, players' discourses made it evident that avatars constituted either transparent (extensions) or translucent (enhancements) representations of their real selves. Finally, collective identity within guilds was mostly perceived and experienced through shared values that transcend the technical format of the game including sense of belonging, trust, respect, putting things into perspective, and modesty.

INTRODUCTION

It has become almost a cliché to say that Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are laboratories in which individuals experiment with their identities. Like most clichés, it happens to be true. Since Sherry Turkle's (1995) seminal work on identity construction in Multi User Dungeons (MUDs), there has been a huge amount of research exploring and documenting a wide range of motivations, behaviors, and consequences associated to players' identity construction and presentation in online games. To be sure, different theoretical and methodological approaches have been implemented, which testifies for the increasing interest of scholars from different quarters in understanding how personal and social identity is created, assumed, and negotiated in online games. But all share the common assumption that in-game identity construction involves complex articulations of players' personal and social backgrounds with affordances of embodiment and communication provided by specific online game technologies.

Constructing one's self-story through avatars or characters in World of Warcraft (henceforth WoW) typically involves adopting the plot and mythology provided by game designers but also adapting the play and narrative culture within which one grows up to WoW's gameplay affordances, although this may not be recognized as such by most players. Through this double process of adoption and adaptation, players juggle multiple roles, try on different hats, different lives, forging relevant selves that can either be relatively permanent or dissolved into new combinations when new game challenges arise. In a persistent fantasy world that demands flexibility in self-presentation and role-playing, identity construction may be conceived as an adaptive process governed by a confederacy of multiple self-conceptions. It is within this flexible and at the same time intricate context that we want to examine how French-speaking players construct their personal and collective identities via their digital counterparts or avatars.

Our aim in this chapter is to put forward a view identity construction in WoW as a socially embedded, situated personal narrative susceptible of being analyzed via players' discourses. We will argue that examining players' identity discourse provides insight into how they concretize perceptions of the ludic structure of the game, reconstruct their biographies as players, impute group identities, and align personal and collective identities. By drawing on Van Dijk's (2001) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, we will examine sixteen online semi-structured interviews of WoW players to understand how players' self-presentation is narratively managed when introducing their avatars, what are parts of them that live in their avatars, and how they perceive and/or construct collective identity within guilds.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. We will start by briefly summarizing recent research focused on identity issues in WoW. After this brief summary, we will introduce the theoretical and methodological background for Critical Discourse Analysis in WoW and present the study results. Finally, we will provide some directions for future research and highlight some conclusions drawn from the present research.

BACKGROUND

Recent research on identity construction and presentation in WoW has showed that the ways in which players digitally (re)present themselves via avatars or characters reveal core assumptions about their actual and idealized self-conceptions. In order to understand the effects of these assumptions on players' avatar construction and game-based socialization, some researchers have examined how players create and negotiate their personal and social identity online by focusing on the role played by physical and personality traits (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006; Bessière, Seay & Kiesler, 2007) as well as cultural and organizational models (Bainbridge, 2010a).

Research done by Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore (2006) examined avatar personalization in three online worlds: Mapple Story, Second Life, and WoW by focusing on two issues (1) evaluating current avatar creation and customization systems, and (2) examining the link between avatar system's features, the eventual avatars created by users, and users' physical and psychological characteristics. As far as identity-related issues in WoW are concerned, the study revealed that most players own multiple characters, which testifies for players need for a flexible appearance. Most WoW players granted relative importance to character features such as hair style, facial characteristics, and hair color but not to character skin color. Furthermore, female players were most likely to create avatars that are idealized versions of themselves than male players, and the latter tend to favor avatars that stand out more than female players. Analysis of reproduction of personality traits showed that, on average, participants rated their virtual character as being more conscientious, extraverted, and less neurotic than they themselves were. The authors conclude that while users do experiment with different body features to somewhat enhance their appearance, they do not tend to change their personality "in-avatar" too much (for a complementary analysis of player/avatar identity and personality based on self-discrepancy theory see Bessière, Seay & Kiesler, 2007) .

Williams, Ducheneaut, Xiong, Yee, Nickell (2006) analyzed the social life of guilds in terms of the meanings, social capital, and networks formed by players inside WoW. Although they did not explicitly address identity issues, their analysis of guild typologies and practices (i.e., social, player versus player, raid, and role-playing) is useful to understand the extent to which guilds function as virtual counterparts of real-life identification spaces. The organic structure of guilds as collectives that share basic goals and play preferences allows players to simultaneously draw on and contribute to the in-game social capital accumulated by the guild-oriented networked action of their members. It may be thus expected that the supporting space so obtained functions as a relatively stable ground for developing trust among fellows, reducing game-related uncertainty, and promoting individual internalization of features that constitute the identity of guilds.

From a theoretical perspective, Tronstad (2008) examined the relationship between character appearance and character capacities in WoW and how this relationship affects the possibility of identifying with the character during play. According to the author, appearance does not reduce to physical appearance; rather, it should be understood as encompassing everything that is included in players' perception of the character. Based on the idea of character capacities, the author highlights two ways of identifying with one's character in WoW: empathic identity and sameness identity. Sameness identity concerns a player's entering the state where he or she has an experience of being the character (acting through the character's capacities). Empathic identity implies experiencing what the character experiences without the feeling of being identical to it (the player directly "experiences" the character's

capacities as if they were her own). In role-playing settings a third kind of identity emerges. By drawing on Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, the author argues that role-playing allows for players to narratively identify with their characters' in-game capacities and actions. This kind of identity along with the internalization of the controls, game mechanics, and knowledge about the game world provide a rewarding experience of flow by which players can accomplish almost utter identification with their characters.

Based on ethnographic and linguistic research, Hagström (2008) analyzed the relationships between avatar naming and player identity and showed that avatars' names reflect players' individual preferences and cultural models associated to linguistic background, literature, religion, art, sports, video games, popular media, etc. Furthermore, the author argues that within the social dynamics of WoW, the name is virtually both the character being played and the player who communicates with others via chat. Names are thus identity markers for avatars and players that bridge two game-related representational realms: being a character and a player.

Brignall (2008) conducted participant observation and informal interviews to study tribalistic behaviors in hard-core WoW players. Tribes frequently form because of the desires of members to be among others with shared identities. Seventy-four percent of his informants reported preferring socializing in WoW to offline socializing and the reasons for such behavior included feelings of strong friendship, group unity, role-playing with personal identity, hanging out with people who share similar likes, social anonymity, and the ability to ignore disliked people. The common reason reported to leave a guild was a desire to associate with players who had shared identities and playing styles. Based on previous MMORPG experience, some hard-core players in this study did not join guilds because they did not want the responsibilities or problems that came with guild membership. The author concludes that the structural environment of WoW fostered some of the negative aspects of tribalism such as quick judgments, stereotyping, and prejudicial behavior among players.

Salazar's (2009) research on Identity Liminal Event (ILE) is one of the rare studies that explicitly theorize social identity in WoW. By combining speech act theory with intergroup processes analysis, he defines IEL as "either an elicited or natural "happening" in a frame of time of a group's life" (p. 11). The author claims that such a happening is an ingroup speech event which triggers in players spontaneous co-construction of social identity boundaries, exclusion/inclusion codes, and narrative and spatial codes. This process of identity co-construction is meant to develop over time which implies that issues in social identity within WoW should be theoretically and methodologically approached to from a diachronic perspective.

Huh & Williams (2010) tested gender swapping in *EverQuestII*, focusing on swappers' real identity, their motivations, and what behaviors they enact within the game world. Although the study was not specifically conducted on WoW players, their results present useful perspectives to understand gender swapping in WoW. Contrary to their initial expectation, the authors found that females were not more likely to swap their gender online than males. However, homosexual users were more likely to change their online gender than straight users. Male players argued that they play a female avatar because it is a pleasing visual object, not a source of identification. As Huh & Williams (2010) argue, "Whether people change their gender online or not, they still keep their offline gender roles in mind. In a sense, the virtual game world is more an extension of the real one than a separate place" (p. 171).

Finally, Bainbridge (2010b) combines his own experience as a WoW player with reflections coming from fantasy literature describing physical and mental attributes of different creatures. He argues that

races in WoW are as subject to in-game stereotyping and prejudice as people are in real life. Players' perception of races and classes are certainly molded by the diegetic structure of the game but also by players' beliefs and feelings formed through their interaction with characters having different racial origins. In terms of identity construction and presentation, the problematic issue arises when an avatar's qualities are attributed to the player behind the character. In as much the same way as in real life, intergroup processes in WoW reflect complex dynamics of attribution, stereotyping, prejudice, and social evaluation which may have non-negligible impact on players' perception and construction of in-game social identity.

All these studies, together with research done on different online games (see Taylor, 2002, 2006) make it evident that players negotiate in somewhat complex ways aspects of their inner selves when engaging in individual and collective play inside WoW. Their results have largely improved our understanding of the different motivations, preferences, and culture-based models that impinge upon players' online ludic experiences. Researchers have used different language-based techniques to examine identity construction including questionnaires, online surveys, standardized scales, field notes, interviews, etc., which show the significance of getting linguistic access to players' identity-related cognitive and social processes and mechanisms implied in their online gaming. Consistent with this idea of finding a way to players' in-game identity experiences through language, we want to analyze WoW players' perception of their real and digitally reproduced selves via their self-crafted stories in order to understand how their personal and collective selves are discursively structured, how their linguistic choices denote particular stances towards themselves and their avatars, and how what they deem relevant to tell conveys assumptions about their real and possible selves.

FRAMING CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF IDENTITY IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

Theoretical Framework

Multidisciplinary research on discourse and identity has showed that the ways in which individuals narratively conceive of and communicate their self- and other-conceptions in different social contexts testify for a non-essentialist view of identity: personal and collective identity are not fixed, monolithic entities; rather they constitute unfinished projects which can be narratively reconstructed and deconstructed depending on particular features of interaction contexts as well as on individuals' preferences, goals, values, and communicative intentions (De Fina, Schiffrin, & Bamberg, 2006; Gergen, 1994; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). This non-essentialist, multifaceted view of the self does not imply, though, that no degree of stability can be granted to identity in narrative. Indeed, the self-concept can be conceived as having both narrative components that are relatively consistent over time (e.g., personality traits, past memories, values) and those that are more malleable and contextually based (Nurius, 1991). On the basis of such relatively stable components, self-relevant aspects can be added or subtracted as individuals "update" their working self-concept through sources such as social comparisons, personal performance, intersubjective feedback, adoption of new roles, etc.

Yet besides being constructions and descriptions in language, self-identity and collective identity are also products of agents whose actions are embedded in social practices. As Barker & Galasiński (2001) have argued, "Identities as descriptions in language are achieved in the everyday flow of language and stabilized as categories through their embedding in the pragmatic narratives of our day-to-day social conduct" (p. 44). These pragmatic narratives are useful to understand how people's interactional, rhetoric, and stylistic choices index their belonging to those categories. As De Fina (2006) has pointed out, "studies of narrative have shown that what defines people as members of a group is not only the content of their stories, but the way in which they use socially established resources to tell them" (p. 352).

One useful way to analyze these imbrications between narrative, identity, and social practices is provided by van Dijk's (2001) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA). Van Dijk (2001) conceives of CDA not as a fixed methodology but as a multidisciplinary orientation to investigate a wide range of social and political phenomena on the basis three interrelated axes: discourse, cognition, and society. Discourse concerns people's engagement in communicative actions by using several semiotic formats such as verbal and non-verbal language, written text, images, typographical layouts, etc. Cognition is to be understood as encompassing people's beliefs, goals, social representations, memory structures, affective appraisals, and mental models involved in discourse and interaction. Finally, society is to be understood as an umbrella term including intersubjective spaces provided by both microstructures (groups, communities, circles) and macrostructures (society, culture) which somewhat determine individual and collective patterns of discourse and interaction. In order to implement CDA as a useful heuristic to analyze identity construction and presentation in WoW some further specifications of the three aforementioned axes are in order.

The discourse axis implies that self-identity is formed by the ability to sustain a narrative of the self that develops a consistent feeling of biographical continuity over time. CDA may be expected to show more explicitly the differences and the functions of the perspectives involved in the understanding, description, and presentation of identity. It may, for instance, show how players actually go about representing and communicating their identities by disclosing themselves in a functional, descriptive (facts) or evaluative (mental state, episodic memory) way. Moreover, insofar as identities are often expressed in personal stories or accounts which are in line with their goals or interests, players can build up, use, and communicate identities strategically, depending on what they consider relevant to convey in a given interaction context. The notion of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986) is helpful here to understand the pragmatic background against which players convey their identity narratives. According to Sperber & Wilson (1986), the principle of relevance states that every act of ostensive communication conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance. In other words, when a speaker communicates a message in a given interaction context, he or she is at the same time making manifest to the audience a cluster of context-relevant assumptions. Such assumptions can be implicitly or explicitly communicated depending on whether the speaker uses implicatures (speech acts implying or suggesting one thing by saying something else) or explicatures (speech acts which explicitly communicate assumptions). In this sense, a player can, for instance, convey either explicit assumptions about his self-concept as a good player by saying "I am a good player" or implicit assumptions by stating "I have leveled my character up to 80 in record time". Furthermore, the principle of relevance also makes evident the speaker's positioning when communicating with the audience: relevance is helpful to disclose what kind of information is selected and what narrative stance is adopted by a player when assembling and displaying who he or she is in interaction with others.

The cognition axis implies that identities are discursive-performative descriptions of personal and social models with which people cognitively and affectively identify. They can be best described as constructed through discursive practices which enact self- and other-conceptions by re-articulating memory structures, shared beliefs, and social representations. Cognition implies what van Dijk (1990) has elsewhere defined as "situation models", that is, "cognitive representations of personal experiences and interpretations, including personal knowledge and opinions … [that] are located in episodic memory" (p. 166). Memory structures play a key role in feeding up self-related narratives by providing both semantic or factual information such as name, date and place of birth, etc. (semantic memory) and episodic or biography-related information such as personal experiences, situated affective appraisals, etc. (autobiographic memory). Cognition is an important part of most online gaming. Besides being the basis for players to understand WoW's gameplay affordances, it also allows researcher to keep track of players' in-game categorizations, perception of gender stereotypes and/or prejudice, and memories concerning their gamer careers.

Finally, society is meant to include the whole range of social affordances provided by intersubjective settings and interactions. Players engage in discourse practices as past or current members of several guilds. This implies that identity narratives are produced and negotiated in specific contexts which allow for building relevant and situated meanings impregnated by specific kinds of normativity (norms, conventions) and worldviews (values). Self-relevant conceptions and meanings can thus be constructed, negotiated, and legitimated in microstructures such as guilds and as well as in macrostructures composed of multiple guilds on a given server.

Method

In order to examine how French-speaking players discursively construct and convey their personal and collective identities in WoW, we adopted an online ethnographic approach (Hine, 2000) composed of participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and critical discourse analysis. During a few months of participant observation, we developed a main character named Oxxia (PvP/PvE) and two "alts" named Jeanolapin (PvP) and Pèrsifleur (RP) through which we gained first-hand insight into the technical, ludic, and social structure of the game. In order to earn participants' trust and thus provide them with a space for dialogue and personal disclosure, we decided to make Oxxia's identity as a researcher explicit during the call for informants posted on the trade chat channel integrated in the game communication interface. Criteria for selecting potential participants included their availability and willingness to participate in an approximately 60 minute online interview as well as their past and/or current active participation as guild members. 50 participants responded to the query and 36 were dropped because they did not meet selection criteria or were unavailable after half the interview was conducted. The final sample is composed of 16 players including 8 adolescents (1 female, 7 males, ages 14-17, M = 13,1) and 8 adults (3 females, 5 males, ages 20-36, M = 27,8). Participants were thus primarily male (12 men, 4 women). Interviews were conducted in French on three severs, namely Krasus (PvP), Cho'Gall (PvP/PvE), and Kirin Tor (RP) via two channels: whisper chat and group chat. Most of the interviews took place in relatively isolated places around Stormwind City that players considered quite enough to answer the interviewer-avatar questions. We decided to gather data from interviews in a written form. This decision was basically motivated by our aim to preserve the in situ textual structure of players' narratives. Even though we were aware of the communication possibilities provided by TeamSpeak or other third-party software, we did not use them because VoIP channels require sharing a server address and password which is guild-specific and thus not

available to outside players. Text was copy/pasted through the official Elephant chat log, translated into English, and organized in separate rtf files. All participants agreed on the recording of their answers and were asked whether they wanted us to keep their avatars' and guild's name preserved. Three of them requested the researcher to keep their guild's name and character names anonymous (See Table 1).

Semi-structured interviews were articulated around the following questions:

1. *Who is your avatar?* This question was explicitly aimed at allowing players the opportunity to introduce their avatars in whatever way they like. We wanted to check for identification patterns and discursive strategies players deem relevant to present their avatars (and themselves) to the online interviewer. This question also allowed us to keep track of overlapping narrative layers between avatars' history and players' game experiences.

2. *What is the part of you that lives in your avatar?* The aim of this question was to check whether avatars are narratively constructed as simple extensions of players' real selves, as game-based actualizations of their possible, idealized selves, or still as an amalgam of both. We wanted to identify the elements in players' self-narratives that point to implicit or explicit relevant assumptions about themselves as agents and their digital representations as proxies. Furthermore, this question was aimed at allowing players to invoke physical attributes, mental models, and personality traits as relevant source of information.

2.1 *For you, what is the difference between playing solo and playing with the members of you guild?* This question was aimed at extending question 2 by identifying players' motivations and behaviors related to both individual and collective in-game play. We expected narrative indicators of motivation, behavior, roles, commitments, and responsibilities to shed light on how players perceive personal and social values, attitudes, and regulatory structures which can in the end be internalized as components of their self-conception.

3. *Do you think you share a collective identity with your guild mates?* This question was intended as a first probe into players' perception of guilds as social settings fostering collective identity. We expected different empirical referents of guilds (name, tabard, charter, etiquette, private website or forum, etc.) and social values (etiquette, mutual respect, solidarity, reciprocity) to play a key role in collective identity construction.

3.1 *Could you specify that which you share with the other members of your guild?* This question was intended to extend question 3 by deepening potential monosyllabic answers to the collective identity question or insufficient understanding of the term "collective identity". We wanted to explore players' sharing of play-related beliefs, attitudes towards winning/failure, in-group customized lexicons, ideal of guilds, etc. The question also allows for examining the extent to which in-game and real-life mental models overlap with each other and how guild support for competence and relatedness fosters in-game social integration and collective identification.

Table 1. Sample of the sixteen participants for this study. Asterisk (*) indicates pseudonyms that have been changed to keep players' avatar and guild names anonym

Player Name	Gender	Age	Kind of Avatar	Avatar Gender	Guild at the time of interview	Time played in WoW
Aernei	M	16	Night Elf Druid	M	Les Fondateurs d'Azeroth	2 years
Aldrak	M	27	Undead Warlock	M	OccO	4 years
Azeona	F	17	Draenei Shaman	F	Ømission*	2 years
Bluefaya	M	14	Draenei Shaman	M	I WoW You	5 months
Chasar	M	14	Night Elf Hunter	M	Gnostage*	2 years
Cystite	F	36	Night Elf Hunter	F	Le Cri du Hibou	4 years
Dõumdõum	M	30	Draenei Shaman	M	--	--
Eructite	M	29	Human Paladin	M	--	5 years
Lexiusxx Jenkinks	M	14	Human Warrior	M	NøRaj Baby Øn Est Weak	4 years
Malonever	M	33	Human Paladin	M	Níenna Ancalimon	1 ½ year
Sagitari	M	16	Dwarf Hunter	M	--	3 years
Shangrilâ	F	27	Night Elf Druid	F	Hazardous Formula	1 ½ year
Smiri	M	20	Dwarf Hunter	M	Troïka	5 years
Paos*	F	21	Gnome Warlock	M	DeathstarsX	--
Solanya	M	17	Draenei Death Knight	F	Níenna Ancalimon	--
Tamor	M	14	Night Elf Rogue	M	Le rêve d'émeraude	6 month

Study Results

We have articulated participants' answers around three main themes according to the topics addressed in the interviews: (1) introducing one's avatar, (2) from real selves to (digitally) possible selves, and (3) guilds and collective identity.

Introducing one's Avatar

Within the context of our online interviews, we assumed that introducing one's avatar is at the same time a rhetorical way of introducing oneself. An avatar indicates that there is a real person—the avatar owner/player—present and actively engaged with the high-fantasy world, a person who has stories worth telling. In order to sort out the different modes of avatar introduction used by players, we have drawn on Van Leeuwen's (2008) categories for representing social actors. Avatars can be *nominated*, that is, (re)presented through their unique identity (i.e., name given by the player) or *categorized* in terms of identities and functions they share with others. This categorization can in turn be realized via

functionalization or identification. *Functionalization* occurs when avatars are referred to in terms of what they do, that is, their occupation or role (professions). *Identification* takes place when avatars are defined, not in terms of what they do, but in terms of what they, more or less permanently, are. Here identification can be instantiated through (1) *classification* of avatars in terms of the major categories provided by game designers (faction, gender, race, class) and groups of players (guild's name) or (2) (re)presentation in terms of the *relational identification* they have with players by means of possessivation and affective attachment ("my shaman", "my creation", "my pet", "my babies").

These linguistic patterns of avatar introduction are to be considered here not as rigid categories but as a heuristic to understand the different ways players talk about their own avatars. As we will see from the interviews, the boundaries between these types of presentation are often blurred, which implies that nomination and categorization are frequently amalgamated at different levels in players' discursive (re)presentation of their avatars. Since players' choice of words is constrained by the interviewing context, and since words take on special significance in particular contexts, paying attention to the grammar of avatar introduction, in particular indexicality or the connection of utterances and pronouns to extra-linguistic reality, helped us track what players consider relevant to introduce their avatars to the interviewer as well as the relevant implicit or explicit assumptions about themselves they convey via their digitally represented counterparts.

Some players categorized their avatars by strictly alluding to their functions: "A level 80 night elf hunter" (Chasar), "A level 80 dwarf hunter" (Smiri). For these players, avatar introduction consisted in condensing their characters' level, class, and race into a single phrase. They felt no spontaneous need to fabricate a story about their avatars' name and/or imagined origins, which is consistent with the pragmatic and disengaged attitude towards WoW conveyed throughout their interviews. Yet for other players, avatar introduction contained mixtures of categorization and nomination. Some of them used combinations of name and function with additional information about their game practice or affective attachment to their avatars:[i]

> Aldrak, warlock specialized in destruction but also in grief when needed…an old rogue who has been knocking about on this server for 4 years now and who nobody knows^^.[ii]

> Bluefaya, Draenei shaman, which I love :-)…Wow is a kind of game you fall in love with (very?) quickly…and you get too attached to your character.[iii]

> Dõumdõum, shaman heal…already three weeks played with it.[iv]

> Eructite, level 80 Human Paladin…but I've got 9 level 80 characters and a bunch of others in pexing or as bags.[v]

Avatar introduction in these cases provided us with a first glimpse into players' perception of themselves as gamers. Besides nominating and categorizing their digital representations in a somewhat standard way inside the game, players spontaneously told the interviewer about time invested in playing in WoW, how they feel about their characters, and how many characters they have created within the game. These

additional indications also reveal the extent to which avatar introduction functions as a pretext to present aspects of the self and game practice players consider worth telling.

Other combinations of nomination and categorization in avatar introduction were framed within first- and third-person narratives articulated around diegetic elements provided by the game's plot and personal experiences and feelings stemmed from players' offline and online practices:

> Cystite, young female night elf so named by her parents because it was her destiny to hurt. She comes from a noble family; she is usually serious and classy…she does not like vulgarity and has a mission to accomplish here, she likes hunting and above all her pet.[vi]

> Solanya, half-draenei (human father) death knight, I'd say between twenty and thirty years old, no brother or sister, parents dead long time ago.[vii]

> Aernei, level 80 druid who belongs to the guild The Founders of Azeroth. They all are my friends and I do my best to support them^^… Aernei (I) has lots of friends in order not to feel alone…My relationship with my avatar has certainly changed but it's true that I was already happy to find an avatar that typifies me ('cause this is my first online game so I was surprised), indeed the more you get it stuffed and leveled up over time, the more you get attached to it…it's like building a house by yourself, you don't want to sell it, you want to live in…anyway, that's my opinion.[viii]

> My name is Malonever. I'm a paladin and have power to bring the dead back to life. I was born in the Gold Shire…when I was a child people called me noob and unstuffy. This made me seek revenge but also recognition from other players.[ix]

In terms of avatar/player indexical identification and presentation, players' use of pronouns is revealing. Avatars are not only nominated but also personified via first- (I, me) and third-person pronouns (he, she) embedded in more or less creative and biographic narratives. For some players, patterns of avatar introduction show the ways in which an avatar' history is narratively intertwined with the player's relevant game experience. As stated above, this intertwining of avatars' and players' narratives furnishes some key elements to understand the extent to which telling an avatar's (hi)story from a first- or third-person perspective becomes a rhetorical pretext to talk about something else considered as relevant by the player, namely his or her evolution of play performance, his or her affective experiences within the game, or the needs he or she wants to be fulfilled. For instance, Malonever's narrative shows the way he mixes diegetic elements of WoW with items of his own autobiographic memory as a newbie thereby making evident that the hierarchical structure of the game imposes constraints on first-time players who are easily represented and categorized as poorly skilled. Malonever's words not only imply the usual stages any first-time player has to go through to improve his or her game practice, but also the fact that in-game prejudice against "newbies" via their avatars can bring about negative affective appraisals of other players (feelings of revenge) and the need for social recognition (Bainbridge, 2010a).

Unlike Malonever's utter indexical identification with his avatar, Aernei's avatar introduction started with a third-person pronoun but then he decided to put the pronoun "I" into brackets. This identity

explicature is introduced before disclosing personal information about loneliness which probably conveys a mental model in which that kind of feelings is usually ascribed to non-digital, human beings. Furthermore, Aernei's narrative is marked by the importance of the guild for his game experience. Besides providing the guild's name as a distinctive sign of belongingness, introducing his avatar is the pretext to convey his need for and commitment to friendship within WoW. In addition, Aernei's use of the house building metaphor to describe avatar creation testifies for his personal view of an avatar as a player-made, time-consuming product which once finished provides affective gratifications to his/her owner. Further in his interview, Aernei explained that creating his social network inside WoW was like "building a second house".

Finally, other players consciously chose their avatars' names on the basis of, for instance, gender, in-game class coherence or past personal experiences:

> I find that the letters or rather the sounds "o" and "a" harmonize nicely. Moreover, femininity is externalized by putting a final letter "a", and "z" is a very little used letter, which I love ^^… a strong identity while remaining feminine (Azeona).[x]

> If you look in a dictionary of Latin, Sagitari relates to archery etc ... So it fits nice into the class I have chosen (Sagitari).[xi]

> Muliang has a history; it is the Buddhist name that I got from a Zen Master in Korea. Shangrilâ is an imaginary place in Tibet. Both names refer to my past, but also to a personal penchant. Muliang and Shangrilâ are two healing characters associated to "Buddhist" things, something that I mean on purpose. That's it. Shangrila, an imaginary place, very much like this character (Shangrilâ).[xii]

Azeona's choice of name is consistent with cultural models of gender-name coherence typical of some Romance languages like Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish in which female names usually contain a distinctive ending in "a". But her choice not only denotes her linguistic knowledge and preferences; it also reflects her will to remain feminine in a world where players can experiment with gender at will. Sagitari looked for semantic coherence between his avatar's class (dwarf hunter) and name and found it in Latin etymology. His choice reflects the satisfaction obtained by aname that faithfully denotes the technical capacities linked to his avatar's class. Shangrilâs' narrative about her avatars' names combined two sources related to a Buddhist worldview: her personal experience in Korea and her penchant for fictional novels (indeed, Shangri-La is a fictional place described by James Hilton in his 1933 novel *Lost Horizon*). Her avatars represent relevant aspects of her life that vivify and integrate her play experience and make it more or less meaningful within the game. In much the same way as Hagström's (2008) research on avatar naming in WoW, these players drawn on different cultural sources of inspiration to give their avatars a distinctive and self-related meaningful name.

As can be seen from their interviews, players introduced their avatars either by simply categorizing them as in-game facts or by telling a story in which initial diegetic elements of the game's plot are gradually and rhetorically mixed with players' real-life game practices. These narratives of avatar introduction involved different ways of telling and doing identity in which temporality is either implicitly or explicitly alluded to. Finally, the sense of identity that is perceived from, or projected through, players'

language behavior when introducing their avatars can be seen as the consequence of moment-by-moment factor-driven decisions about what in-game and out-game self-related assumptions they deem relevant to communicate to the interviewer.

From Real Selves to (Digitally) Possible Selves

Nurius (1991) has argued that identity has been often approached to in the literature from two somewhat paradoxical conceptualizations of the self-concept. On the one hand, the self-concept can be understood in terms of its stable and unifying features (biographical self) and, on the other hand, it can be framed in terms of its situated and mutable features. According to the author, one way to somewhat resolve this tension is to put forward a working conception of the self understood in terms of actuality and potentiality, that is, as a constantly shifting configuration of self-conceptions between real and possible selves. Possible selves are thus conceptualized as working conceptions of the self concerning past-based and future-oriented beliefs and feelings about what people would like to be or are afraid of becoming (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Within the context of online games, self-related actuality and potentiality have been examined in terms of the physical and personality traits as well as the behavioral patterns players "transfer" to their in-game digital representations. In this sense, endowing one's avatar with slightly modified or radically changed physical features can be understood as a way for players to cope with some of their bodily features they consider self-discrepant or socially undesirable. At the same time, the anonymity dimension encapsulated in the in-game required pseudonymity, may allow players to adopt behavioral patterns they do not normally display in real settings. Aspects of one's personality can thus be subject to more or less controlled experimentation within a context in which the risk of deception but also the benefits from pretence are high.

Different patterns and levels of self-experimentation transpired in our informants' discourses. Some players reported that most of their real selves came out through their avatars' look and ways of speaking and acting:

> I'm not so different when I play WoW, it's more like another facet of my personality ...our characters are quite oddly like us, we do not make use of the virtual environment to be different (Cystite).[xiii]

> For me the avatar is a tool that allows me to have fun and meet goals in the game, I do not behave differently from real life when I use it to play with other people (Sagitari).[xiv]

For these players, avatars constitute extensions or "transparent representations" of what they are and how they behave in real life. They did not feel any need to be someone else online, to adopt different behavioral patterns. Other players made moderate claims about player/avatar physical and personality resemblance. For them, their avatars' look and behavior reflected choices based on aesthetic values, personal ideals, social persuasion, or representing the two sides of the same coin:

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Back to my avatar's physical appearance… let's say…for me it has some importance but not too much…as a druid I can change shapes so I rarely see his real physical appearance…and his white hair doesn't mean he is old, it just makes me think of snow^^…When I started playing, I wanted a male character who looks classy and experienced but young…that's why he has a young face and white hair…I chose that class because it concerns nature and animals and balance…quite spiritual… and at the same time it gave me the impression of being a justice and natural rights protector…but I'm not a green activist…(Aernei).[xv]

My character is my creation and he evolves through me. He loves adventures like me but we do not have the same physical traits… I first wanted an orc, but my friends were playing in the alliance so they told me to choose a human ... I do not like humans' heads so I have it stuffed to mask his head ...My character has traits and clothes that I never dare wear in real life (Lexiusxx).[xvi]

There is a certain part of me in my paladin ... The light protector, it fits nice with the vision I have of myself ... By contrast, my warlock is quite the opposite of my personal mental image: ugly, little and nasty (Eructite).[xvii]

For Aernei and Lexiusxx (both of them are real-life fourteen-year-old males) the physical appearance of their avatars have different connotations. Aernei's choice of a classy, experienced, and young male character conveys the Western ideal of an "interesting" male who is young enough to correspond to his own age-related view yet mature enough to be more eye-catching. In addition, by explicitly stating that his avatar is young despite its white hair, he wanted to make sure the interviewer does not spontaneously associate white hair to old age. For Aernei, vindicating his real age through his avatar's look ("he" is not old), even though it can change shapes, was an indexical way to affirm his identity as a male teenager. His choice of avatar class reflects coherence between his role as a druid and his own nature-friendly and spiritual values. Positive feelings associated to seeing himself as a justice and nature rights protector represent the extent to which a digital version of his idealized self fosters his self-esteem, even though his real self has nothing to do with ecological activism. On the other hand, Lexiusxx's story conveys different but equally interesting points. Although his avatar represents things he loves doing and clothes he never dare wear in real life, his choice of a human avatar was determined by social influence which reflects what social psychologists have called "subjective norm", that is, judgments about and decisions made on the basis of what others who are important to the person think he or she should do (Fishbein, 1980). Yet the costs of "pleasing others" can bring about self-related conflicting values: playing an avatar he did not originally want to play and masking its physical appearance because of aesthetic reasons. Eructite's answer somewhat exemplifies the Dr. Jekill/Mr. Hyde popular culture view of split personality and identity. He conveys the idea that avatars allow for digitally embodying opposite facets of one's personality worth experimenting with in an environment where the disclosure of one's bad and nasty selves may find an ideal place. This idea is nicely represented by Bluefaya: "I am who I want when I play, I can be normal, or piss off, or play the lover, I don't give it a damn because there is not much risk (Bluefaya).[xviii]

Masks and facades were among the reasons invoked by some players to account for their real/virtual self relationship:

[Oxxia]: What is the part of you that lives in your avatar?

[Azeona]: I remain myself. My avatar is a façade. And when I play, I use programs like Mumble, Teamspeak, so it is the "real" me who speaks…my character is a facade, not a hiding place. A facade because it is necessary in this game, it certainly expresses my tastes (hairstyle, etc.) but not my personality.[xix]

[Oxxia]: is your avatar a kind of loophole for you?

[Paos]: uhm…talking about me through an avatar, something fake, a character…that's weird…my character = rather a mask, a bit like what I want to be or would like to be and at the same time hiding me because I do not normally talk about myself through it.[xx]

Players' allusion to masks and facades is worth noting here. A mask is usually understood as something that conceals, partially or totally, one's face. It implies that no matter the perspective adopted there will always be some features of the actor's face that remain inaccessible to the audience. In this sense, Paos' metaphorical view of her avatar reflects a dramaturgical construction of virtual identity similar to that advanced by Goffman (1959) in which the self enacts multiple performances in order to negotiate context-related identities. Unlike masks, façades are a matter of available perspective (what can be seen from a specific point of view) and do not necessarily mean conscious hiding. Azeona's conception of her avatar as a façade can be understood as discarding any possible synecdochic sense of identity: an avatar does not stand for the whole player's self. This is consistent with her view that tastes and personality are two different things. Although, this point is largely arguable on psychological grounds, what is relevant in her answer is that her avatar's physical attributes do not denote her entire personality. Interestingly, Azeona's answer implies distinguishing between two ways of being in the game: as a character and as the real player behind it. Awareness of these two perspectives that tend to blend due to the feelings of presence fostered by the game's immersive interface, represents a somewhat instrumental view of avatars as digital artifacts, that is, avatars are simply ludic-oriented prostheses that allow players to engage with the game.

Most players showed gender consistency between them and their avatars. Only two of our informants played avatars of the opposite sex and their reasons for doing so include:

This character is a female because I created the story that way but I'm a man^^ (Solanya).[xxi]

I'll often build female characters because I'm a girl ^^…I'd like to create human or dranei characters because they have an aesthetic side I like much…I put some of my traits into my first two characters and then I got fun playing "fashion designer" with the others (Paos).[xxii]

For Solanya (a real life 17-year-old male player), the reason for playing a female avatar highlights his freedom to imagine and create gender possibilities he does not necessarily identify with. Paos' choice of female avatars is consistent with her real life gender and her aesthetic values. Although during the interview she was playing a male gnome warlock, her answers mostly concerned her past and current female avatars. For another player, technical changes introduced by game designers had a significant impact on his view or role-playing, gender, and avatar distinctiveness:

[Oxxia] do you give your characters special features?…
[Dõumdõum]: Arf … RP disappeared the day Blizzard decided to add a letter to its server "N Rp",
normality quickly took over it so that giving your avatar a particular phrasing or a gender makes
no longer any sense : (
…

[Oxxia]: do you use your avatar to change some of your features: gender, age, etc.. ?
[Dõumdõum]: Yuck, no, by the way I do not understand a male's need for playing a female avatar
(have not met the opposite case).[xxiii]

For Dõumdõum, role-playing in normal realms is no longer an exciting experience. What the player
alludes to by "normality" implies the idea of technically standardizing players' control over their gameplay
thereby altering the feeling of immersion they can derive from their play experiences. If everyone's
gameplay gets standardized, endowing one's avatar with distinctive features such as way of speaking and
gender makes no sense. Furthermore, gender swapping is something he is not comfortable with. His
pejorative expression "Yuck" when speaking about males' reasons for playing female avatars probably
conveys social stereotyping concerning maleness as something not to play with (even digitally).

Finally, other players deliberately concealed aspects of real selves via their avatars. Their reasons to do
so include socially undesirable consequences inside the game but also personal coherence with ways of
behaving in real life:

Sometimes I don't say I'm a girl lol because men in WoW get quickly aroused and overzealous
once they know it (Paos).[xxiv]

Usually, they [guild members] only accept adults when carrying out a raid, so I pretend to be
older than my age (Tamor).[xxv]

[Malonever]: Given that I'm not a fervent fan of heroic fantasy I chose a black character, which as
far as I know is something rarely alluded to in this universe…
[Oxxia]: you're not black in real life, are you?…
[Malonever]: no, but if you want more details, I've always loved hiding my face and skin
color…my character is a bit like me because I play him …he's rather obstinate.[xxvi]

These strategic decisions imply carefully choosing what aspects of the self can be disclosed in a given
context and being coherent with the strategically adopted role. As Paos argues, "sometimes" it is better for
her not to say she is a woman, which implies that judging the woman-friendly dimension (or the absence
of male "sexual pressure") of the play environment is crucial to communicate her real gender. In the case
of Tamor, pretending to be older than his age—adopting an in-game second-order layer of make
believe—is the way to enjoy going out for raids with his guild mates. Malonever's choice of a black avatar
conveys his will to explore a fantasy universe mostly composed of Nordic-like human characters from a
somewhat marginal perspective which echoes research done on racial inequality and ethnocultural
stereotypes within WoW (Nakamura, 2008, Higgin, 2009). For these players, concealing or enhancing
some aspects of their selves is possible because of the communication affordances of WoW. Yet unlike the

abovementioned players for whom avatars are extensions or transparent representations of themselves, these players' avatars stand as translucent representations or their real selves, filtering and diffracting their physical and social identities.

Guilds and Collective Identity

Collective identity can be understood as the perceived sense of "we-ness" and joint agency anchored in real or imagined shared experiences and features of a social group (Snow, 2001). Consistent with this conception, our interviews showed that for some players collective identity is imagined, supposed, or hoped to exist rather than experienced directly. When explicitly asked if they share a collective identity with their guild mates those players answered, for instance: "I hope so otherwise there would be no reason for the guild to exist!!! (Aldrak)"[xxvii] or "I wouldn't go so far as to say that" (Solanya).[xxviii] Even though they were aware of their sharing distinctive symbols and play aspirations with members of their respective guilds, it seems that the very term "collective identity" makes little or no sense to them. By contrast, when asked to specify what they share with guild mates, they provided relevant components of collective identity such as sharing positive and negative feelings depending on whether they succeed or fail during raids, a friendly and trustful atmosphere, an ideal of serious and engaged playing, good writing (no SMS language), etc. So, even though the formal concept seems to make little sense to those players, collective identity was nevertheless *talked* into existence when asked to reflect on what they actually share with other guild members.

These answers are at odds with those of more "skeptical" players for whom membership in a guild does not constitute collective identity "even if people must think the same way to have affinities" (Bluefaya)[xxix]. Three of them provided personal reasons to justify why they think there is no collective identity within their guilds:

> I'm not looking for virtual friendship here. I just use the system, of course, less than other people do, but I do use it (Dõumdõum).[xxx]

> I don't attach myself to others because this is just a game (Chasar).[xxxi]

> If I leave the guild, some people will be disappointed but I don't think they would hate me like the slave who leaves her master… For me, the guild is not a family, it's just a hostel…A guild is just having fun killing bosses with people one likes (Azeona).[xxxii]

Their synecdochic answers—each time collective identity is denoted by a potential single component: friendship, attachment, fraternal bonds—clearly reflect that they conceive of and engage with the game's ludic affordances in a rather instrumental way: as an entertaining system designed to provide fun. Overall, skeptical players often argued that belonging to a guild is a necessary and convenient condition to attain some goals and have fun playing the game but it does not create bonds strong enough to be perceived as establishing collective identity. In other words, for these players membership in a guild—the objective

condition of belonging to the guild—does not imply assimilating their selves or attaching themselves to any supposed in-group identity prototype.

Other players did consider that they share a common identity with their guild mates. We have identified two kinds of referents in their answers around which collective identity appears to be articulated: (1) empirical referents including guilds' names, tabards, verbal styles, and charters, and (2) more abstract referents encompassing a variety of shared values like trust, mutual respect, solidarity, game performance, putting things into perspective, etc.

For some players, the guild's name and tabard were distinctive empirical referents of their group identity. Moreover, since those referents are easily recognizable by members of other guilds, players are held accountable for any words and deeds performed when acting on behalf of the guild: "when we speak we've got the guild's name beneath our characters' so we do our best to look after the guild's profile" (Aernei)[xxxiii], "you 'personify' the guild: we have a tabard, the first sign of belonging, and also the guild's name under ours" (Shangrilâ)[xxxiv]. For still other players, the tabard represented the guild's shared sense of self-derision: "the guild's tabard is nice and also the ambiance…but the tabard is really great :p pink with a red heart on it… that's too much funny" (Smiri).[xxxv] Verbal styles were also alluded to as a specific referent of collective identity: "Think for example of Azura^^…they all share the same passion, they're always together. Their 'distinctive sign' is that they imitate troll language (Eructite).[xxxvi] Yet overall, verbal style was not a significant indicator of collective identity. Besides adopting the game-based lexicon for pragmatic reasons, the majority of our informants reported having no secret codes or guild-specific verbal styles. Finally, the basic function of guild charters can be seen as providing normative criteria for judging players' behavior. Yet in most interviews, guild charters were just considered as rules of etiquette for collective play but not as strong bases for building collective identity. Although all players were aware of the normative implications of guild charters, a number of them do not respect charters all the time or find ad hoc ways to get it round. On closer inspection, collective identity in most of the interviews seems to be derived from and reinforced by shared contents other than charter-based norms.

Players' apparent non-compliance with guild charters does not necessarily mean that guilds are utterly anarchic groups. Unlike most empirical referents, shared values were alluded to as playing a key role in structuring players' perception of a common identity within guilds. Values transpired in most of the non-skeptical players' interviews as the basic elements for the expression of collective identity insofar as they embody the playing ideals that prototypically define their past and current guilds. We have identified ten values players highlighted in their interviews and articulated them around three dimensions: (1) self-related values, (2) guild-related values and (3) play-related values (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Dimensions of values addressed by players.
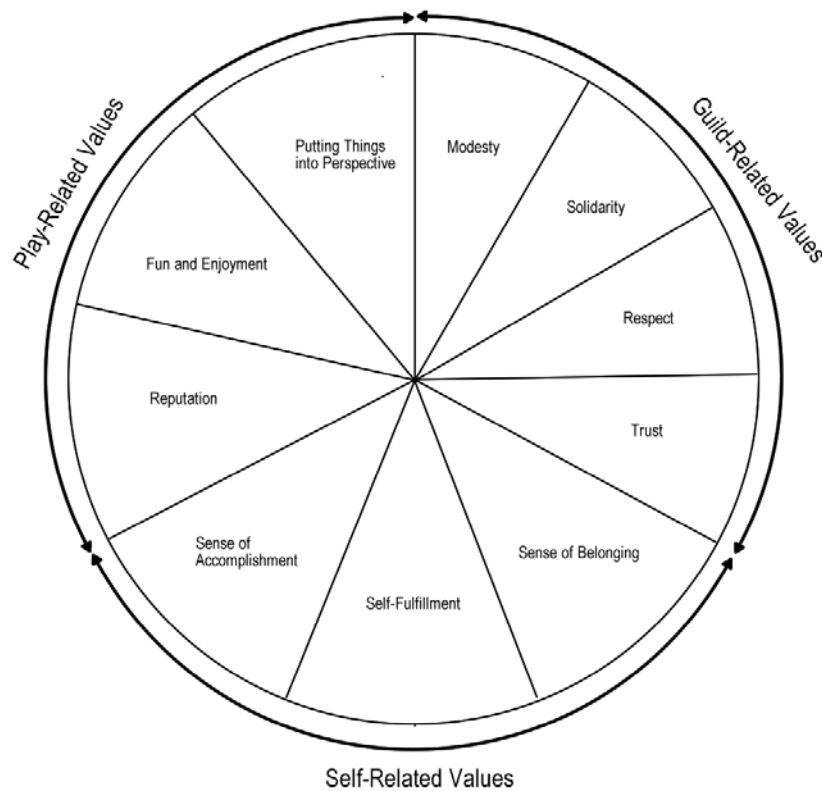
This scheme reflects three dimensions of motivational goals and valuing attitudes underlying collective identity in our informants' guilds. The fact that we analytically differentiate them does not mean that they belong to unrelated and merely juxtaposed spheres of desired states and outcomes. On the contrary, throughout our informants' interviews there seems to be a certain consistency among self-related, guild-related, and play-related values. The self-related dimension encompasses shared motivational goals that set the stage for personal achievement inside guilds. The point here is that players value the opportunities afforded by their guilds to satisfy their need for in-game performance and self-image improvement. Being able to accomplish challenging tasks, to use one's best assets in the game, and to feel that one is accepted as member of a guild are all end-states pursued by most of our players. Yet individual improvement is just one of the factors worth being valued. These self-related values also resonate with collective expectations and explicit demands for social accomplishment as a group on the basis of guild-related values embodying socially shared sentiments and desired group attributes. Being able to help others, to respect them, to trust them and to be modest imply a dynamics of intersubjective commitment to a particular way of being which characterizes the specificity of a guild in the eyes of players. Finally, the play-related dimension lays the ground for putting into practice self-related and guild-related values as players look for the same kind of game-based experiences and assume self-reflecting attitudes towards their individual and collective behavior and accomplishments.

As suggested above, self-related values mostly concern players' in-game self-enhancement, that is, fostering or extending their capabilities as guild members. These values include the sense of belonging

(being accepted and needed by the guild), self-fulfillment (fostering the best use of one's talents inside the game), and the sense of accomplishment (being able to succeed at what players, individually and collectively, want to do). Among our informants, Aernei illustrates the sense of belonging by building an analogy between his attachment to his guild and a particular version of patriotism:

> It's a bit like patriotism but not so strong, we shouldn't exaggerate…patriotism is just that you've this nationality and you're permanently in this country so you want to protect it, and although you meet some bastards there, you know it's your country…whereas given that there are 70 of us in the guild if someone pisses us off we can get rid of him (Aernei)[xxxvii]

This analogy is, of course, limited but it nevertheless highlights some elements worth noting. On Aernei's view, belonging to a guild is like belonging to a country, having a nationality, and claiming the right to inhabit its land. The idea behind his discourse of "country" and "nationality" is that of a space/time situated condition in which everyone is granted a shared identity that is meant to be protected. But unlike discourse about countries and nationalities which, in principle, allows equal and permanent belonging conditions even to "bastards", Aernei's view is particular in that belonging to a guild is not a perpetually granted condition. If someone does not "adapt" to this shared value he or she can be ruthlessly excluded. Individual failures to adapt to a guild' way of functioning can thus trigger the guild's adoption of policies of member exclusion. For Aernei, belonging to a guild is something contingent, something players have to earn constantly by adapting themselves to and fostering the guild's expectations dynamics.

For another player, the sense of belonging is something that comes along with entering a guild:

> When you enter a guild you conclude a tacit agreement…this passage gives you a feeling of belonging inside the pixelated jungle…you can count on the other guild members…for some, the guild provides security (Shangrilâ)[xxxviii]

By alluding to a "tacit agreement", Shangrilâ conveys the implicature that collective values exert normative force on players' behavior. On her view, tacitly adopting the guild's values implies complying with the guild's ethos as a condition for players not only to be granted a membership but especially to develop their "sense" of belonging, their trust in other members, and their feeling of being secured inside the pixelated jungle. This capacity to adopt guild's values also implies being able to balance personal goals and collective expectations, and to share the web of collective meanings and aspirations characteristic of a given guild.

Self-fulfillment was indirectly alluded to by one player when talking about what he shares with other guild members:

> To show respect to other players: to optimize one's character in order not to slow other players down and to share information to help them improve their own characters (Eructite)[xxxix]

On the one hand, this link between respect and self-fulfillment testifies for the relationship between self-related and guild-related values implied in collective identity discourse. On the other hand, the idea behind Eructite's view of respect is that of providing guild mates with opportunities and assistance to enhance their levels of performance and develop their talents inside the game. The fostering of self-

fulfillment via respect entails here that respecting someone is not just a passive state of not harming her but an active (to show, to express) engagement to recognize her potential as a player as well as a fellow who shares and engages with a particular way of playing. It follows from Eructite's view that players' self-fulfillment is contingent both upon improving one's character technical capacities and upon players' readiness to share improvement-related information with each other.

As far as self-accomplishment is concerned, two players alluded to it as a shared aim within their guilds:

> I'm looking for perfection…we all share the same aim: perfecting our characters' armor, gaining power, and being recognized (Lexiusxx)[xl]

> [We all share] a common aim: "we want to move forward, to progress" while respecting the fact that we can't oblige people to be present five times per week from 8:00pm till 12:00pm (Aldrak)[xli]

For these players, perfection, power, recognition and progress are the ways to make self-accomplishment real. Lexiusxx' passage from "I" to "We" in which both pronouns come together to denote a shared goal of perfection is relevant for him to justify that there is consistency between what he is looking for within the game and the valuing framework provided by his guild. The "we" comes here to the fore as an intersubjective valuing support for him to be able to succeed at what he wants to do. Although Aldrak's view is to some extent similar to that of Lexiusxx's, his claim is more moderate in that real-life conditions can put constraints on what they want to achieve collectively. The idea behind this claim is that game-related self-accomplishment cannot be pursued to the detriment of other values holding for people's real lives.

In addition to self-related values, players also have addressed guild-related values which imply self-transcendence in the sense of valuing concern for other members' welfare and readiness to provide them with assistance and advice. Among these values are trust (being reliable and able to rely on other members when needed), solidarity (caring about other players, distributing loots among players who need them the most), respect (giving and receiving recognition inside the guild), and modesty (not showing off or being arrogant when accomplishing big raids and risky events).

Trust appeared implicitly in one of our interviews as a value which affects the guild's way of functioning:

> An individual's bad behavior may cause problems to the guild…those behaviors generally include: stealing, lying, letting guild members down (Shangrilâ)[xlii]

The verbal labels used by Shangrilâ to refer to "bad behaviors" convey the idea of betrayal, of failing to live up to implicit or explicit commitments. The very fact that such behaviors are labeled as "bad" reflects the normative force granted to trust and trustworthy actions by the player. Even in highly competitive environments like WoW, in which selfish motives can impregnate some players' words and deeds, trust plays the role of social glue that binds players together when pursuing common goals.

Modesty was referred to as a value associated to being classy and showing "high level performance" patterns of behavior:

I feel that killing bosses without showing off is classy; so far, I find that the best guilds, at least in the Alliance faction, do not show off! (Azeona)[xliii]

Although it might seem odd for a young player to postulate modesty as a value, for Azeona modesty is a way to gain social recognition inside WoW. Modesty conveys the background idea of playing in a mature way and reacting soberly to big collective achievements. This also implies adopting a specific outlook on the game: the more you are modest when attaining some goal, the more you are recognized as being classy, elegant. For some of our young players modesty plays an instrumental role in allowing them to reach an ideal end-state: being socially recognized and admired.

Solidarity was addressed by one player as forming the core of any true guild:

I'd say this is my first true guild, a guild where people help each other, and if you need something there's someone who has it…that sort of things (Bluefaya)[xliv]

Bluefaya's qualification of a "true", genuine guild as one in which people help each other conveys his mental model of solidarity as altruistic action. Although this player may be largely unaware of the selfish motivations that can guide some "altruistic" behaviors, his view about solidarity highlights the value of intra-guild cooperation and fulfillment of others' needs inside the game.

Respect was evoked by one player as an essential yet not already found value within guilds:

I try to go my way without hurting others and I'm intolerant against those players who only care about leveling up to the detriment of other people… by and large I dream of a RP guild in which people value fair playing and show respect for others in any situation. I've never seen this before in wow (Eructite)[xlv]

Eructite's disappointment about his past experiences in guilds denotes the idea that instrumental behaviors aimed at just leveling up characters by whatever means are incompatible, in his view, with respect for other people as a core value. His claim about respect here is consistent with his indirect way of speaking about self-fulfillment (see above) insofar as both values imply a sense of "social responsibility" to other players' technical and relational improvement within the guild. He is not objecting to leveling one's character up since this is part and parcel of the game. To his mind, what is unacceptable is that players consider game performance (level up) as a primary value without taking into account that "players" also are "people" that can be hurt.

Finally, play-related values encompass instrumental desired outcome such as reputation (building in-guild and out-guild individual and collective prestige) and end-states like fun and enjoyment (sharing the same hedonistic attitude towards the game) or putting things into perspective (being able to realize that WoW is just a place where social gaming can take place).

Insofar as WoW is a competitive game, reputation holds for individual and collective achievement. One of our informants referred to guild's reputation in terms of appreciation and popularity:

Yeah, [reputation] it's very important because the more people see you as strong the more your popularity ranking rises (Lexiusxx)[xlvi]

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Reputation is one of the values typically addressed by our youngest informants. Although for some of them reputation constitutes an end-state worth pursuing in itself, others take it from a more instrumental perspective and see it as a subsidiary outcome of playing "mature style". For Lexiusxx, reputation is a primary value in that it provides him with intra- and inter-guild appreciation. Throughout his interview, he was concerned with a specific idea of popularity as based on having his character stuffed, accomplishing difficult challenges, being wealthy, and posting short videos (also known as *machinimas*) of his guild killing big bosses. On his view, popularity and, by extension, reputation reflects his self-perception as someone appreciated for being a strong player and belonging to a strong, high level guild.

Fun and enjoyment concerned the hedonic dimension of the game, a dimension which, in the eyes of some players, most hard gamers tend easily to forget:

> We only share playing time but in a good atmosphere (Cystite)[xlvii]

> The big difference is between "us" and the people who take it too much seriously…it's amazing to see lots of haters in the battlefields, they don't really enjoy it which in the end is the game's aim (Smiri)[xlviii]

> Unlike other guilds, which I won't mention here, that tear themselves apart, the most important things for us is to play and have fun (Tamor)[xlix]

Fun and enjoyment appear here as evaluative criteria for distinguishing between identity patterns referred to "us" and "others" who have troubles in realizing that, as a game, WoW represents a practice from which players can draw fun. These different perspectives on the ludic/hedonic dimension of WoW are also what motivate some players to quit their past guilds and to enter other ones that fit with their fun-related expectations.

Putting things into perspective was referred to by players as characterizing their game practice:

> The capacity to put things into perspective, if we can't kill a boss it's not the end of the world, and if we succeed at it it's not a reason to showing off (Eructite)[l]

Eructite's claim underlies the capacity to see oneself as a player, to take some distance from the game without losing one's attachment to both the guild and the way of playing. Furthermore, it also stands for a balanced perspective on the way guilds manage to draw fun, success, and failure from collective actions. In a nutshell, putting things into perspective refers to a healthy, self-reflective attitude towards the self that permeates all the three valuing dimensions and ensures the persistence of the guild and the play over time.

As we can see, in most players' interviews values appear not just as optional extras about individual and collective behavior but also as standards for the self and the guild. They function as an "identity capital" from which players draw normative, symbolic, and emotional patterns of sharing which justify both their sense of joint agency and their motivations to be part of and work for the guild. It should be noted, though, that the values forming the core of a guild stem from the interplay between players' personal histories (desires, memories, and expectations) and the intersubjective affordances of the game. This is consistent with Pearce and Artemesia's (2009) claim that players arrive on the scene "with a certain set of values and a predisposition to socially emergent behaviors" (p. 73). Yet this does not imply that players'

preexisting value systems and behavioral predispositions are so rigid that neither adaptation to nor adoption of in-game emergent values can take place inside the platform. In fact, the process of building collective identity appears to be marked by players' constant negotiation and monitoring of their value-based view of themselves, the guild, and the way of playing as can be seen from their belonging to past and current guilds. Such a negotiation is in line with Rettberg's (2008) claim that "the process of advancing in WoW is to some extent modeled on the process of getting an education" (p. 25). Players not only have to be "educated" in terms of learning how to master the technical and tactic intricacies of the game but also, and to some extent more critically, they are educated in what Klapp (1971, quoted in Klastrup, 2008 p. 163), speaking of social typing, called "collective values" and "socially necessary sentiments". These values and sentiments are triggered by the game's character narrative, which defines roles, types, attitudes, and levels of responsibility, but they still have to be felt and lived as characterizing both the guild's aims and the collective way of playing. Such feeling and living of values resonates with Gee's (2003) view of "projective identity" according to which players project their own values and desires onto virtual characters, see the latter as their "projects" in the making, and engage with relevant others who share or at least are able to negotiate on those values and desires. Values appear thus as significant components of collective identity as they encapsulate not only players' expectations about the game but also a reflective stance both towards themselves and towards others with whom they engage in collective playing. They define the specificity of a guild as they guide the selection of the means and ends of specific actions, and serve as criteria by which objects, actions or events are evaluated. Finally, unlike norms which are explicitly formulated in guild charters, values are carried latently through the social process of playing together and provide the sense of collective identity players experience, imagine, or dream of within guilds.

FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

The present study reveals that critical discourse analysis is a helpful heuristic to understand language behavior patterns of identity construction inside WoW. It has showed, for instance, that players' narratives about their avatars convey relevant cognitive and social representations of their possible or imagined selves as well as self-related aspects of their game practices. Moreover, collective identity inside guilds was showed to be discursively enacted via evocation of shared values among guild mates. Yet given its synchronic nature, this study constitutes a "snapshot" of how French-speaking WoW players construct and negotiate their personal and collective identities within the game. Since identity narratives are complex processes constructed and deconstructed over time, deeper insight into identity construction inside WoW can be gained by implementing critical discourse analysis longitudinal research aimed at examining, for instance, identity discourse at different times in players' and guilds' game careers. Furthermore, a more detailed view of players' discursive construction of identity could be attained by gathering face-to-face data and thus keeping track of how players verbally negotiate aspects of their in-game and real-life practices. Since players can also extend their game-based interactions to include meetings in real life, it would be useful to examine their patterns of interaction in out-game settings and the impact of real life events on the process of collective identity construction.

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Finally, adopting a mixed methods approach based on discourse analysis and quantitative data mining can help researchers not only generalize their results to wider parts of the gamer population but also examine cross-cultural patterns of identity construction in WoW. Since narratives are widespread practices of constructing objects, roles, and collectivities grounded in cognitive models available in most if not all cultures (Barker & Galasiṅki, 2001, Sperber, 1996), analyzing and comparing intercultural patterns of in-game identity construction and presentation can shed light on the potential transcultural impact of WoW as a globalizing social practice.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have provided a critical discourse analysis of French-speaking WoW players' personal and social identity. We have showed that personal identity inside WoW is mostly (re)constructed as a narrative in which players merge their in-game perceptions via their avatars with their relevant real-life experiences as players. Avatar introduction has been showed to constitute a rhetorical mode of putting forward self-related assumptions and aspects of one' identity. These rhetorical modes have also revealed that for some players avatars function as extensions or transparent representations of themselves. For others, the representational flexibility of avatars inside WoW allows them to enhance and/or conceal some aspects of their real selves they deem self-discrepant or contextually undesirable. Finally, collective identity within guilds was perceived and constructed by players through some empirical referents such as guild's name, tabard, and verbal style but the majority of our informants reported shared values as denoting shared identity inside guilds. Consistent with major trends in the literature on online games, French-speaking WoW players' identity experiments are less a matter of becoming someone else online than negotiating and virtually representing self-discrepant aspects of their real lives.

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[i] All typing errors, grammatical mistakes, idioms, shortened forms, and slang in the original French quotations are reproduced verbatim.

[ii] «Aldrak, démoniste spécialisé en destruction et accessoirement affliction quand le besoin se fait sentir… Un vieux roublard qui traine sa bosse sur ce serveur depuish 4 ansh maintenant et que personnesh ne connait ^^ »

[iii] « BlueFaya Draneai Chaman Que j'affectionne :) … Wow est un jeu qu'on affectionne TRES (trop?) vite Et on s'attache assez rapidement a son perso »

[iv] « Dōumdōum, chaman heal…temps joué environs 3 semaines… »

[v] « Eructite, paladin vindicte level 80, j'en ai 9 80 et une floppée en pexing ou qui servent juste de sacs »

[vi] « Cystite, jeune elfe de la nuit nommée ainsi par ses parents car elle était destinée à faire mal elle vient d'une famille noble, elle est en général classe et sérieuse elle aime la chasse par-dessus tout et son familier…elle n'aime pas la vulgarité et a une mission à remplir ici »

[vii] « Solanya, chevalier de la mort, demi-draeneï (père humain), Entre vingt et trente ans je dirais, Ni frère ni sœur, Parents morts il y a longtemps. »

[viii] « …un druide du nom de Aernei nivo 80 ki appartien à la guilde Les Fondateurs d'Azeroth ce sont tous mes amis et je les soutiens du mieu que je peux ^^…Aernei(moi) a bcp d'amis afin de ne pas se sentir seul… mon rapport à mon avatar a effectivement évolué mais il est vrai qu'au début j'étais déja vraiment content d'avoir un avatar qui me représentait (pk c'était mon 1er jeu online alors forcément j'étais un peu étonné), en fait le fait de le faire évoluer et stuffé fais kil est difficile de s'en séparé…En fait , plus tu le up plus tu met du tps sur ton avatar alors forcément à force tu as plus envie de le lacher c'est un peu comme une maison que l'on a construit de ces propres mains on a pas envie forcément de la vendre on préfère y vivre en tout cas c'est mon opinion »

[ix] « Je m appelle malonever. jsuis paladin et j'ai le pouvoir de ressuciter les morts je suis né dans le conté de l'or petit je me faisais insulté de noob et de unstuff ce qui a fini par me faire développer un sentiment de revanche et un besoin de reconnaissance auprès des autres joueurs

[x] « je trouve que la lettre, ou pluror les sons o et a s'accordent joliement, de plus la féminité s'exteriorise beaucoup par une derniere lettre en a
et le z est une lettre assez peu utilisée, que j'aime beaucoup ^^…une identité forte en restant feminine »

[xi] « si on regarde dans un dico de latin sagitari ce rapporte à la chasse à l'arc etc… donc ça allait bien à la classe que j'avais choisi »

[xii] « Muliang est un nom qui a une histoire ; c'est le nom bouddhiste que j'ai reçu d'un maître zen en Corée ; shangrila est un lieu imaginaire au Tibet. les deux noms font référence à la fois à mon passé, mais aussi à une appétence perso muliang et shangrila sont deux personnages heals associés donc à des choses "bouddhistes"
ce qui n'est pas innocent de ma part voilou shangrila, lieu imaginaire tout comme ce personnage »

[xiii] « je ne suis pas différente, c'est plus comme une autre facette de sa personnalité… nos persos nous ressemblent étrangement, nous ne profitons pas du virtuel pr être different »

[xiv] « pour moi l'avatar n'est qu'un outil qui me permet de m'amuser et de remplir des objectifs dans le jeu je ne me comporte pas differemment avec les autres joueurs quand j'utilise cet avatar que dans la réalité »

[xv] « revenons à mon avatar alors mon phisik pour moi disons kil a une importance mais pas torp nn plus…étant droood je peux changer de forme il est rare ke je vois le réel phisik de mon perso..c'est pas pk il a les cheveux blancs kil est vieu mon perso sa me fait penser à la neige^^… qand jai commencé je voulais un mec ki a la classe et ki ait l'air d'un vétéran mais jeune d'où le visage jeune et les cheveux blancs… ma classe je sais pourkoi je l'ai choisi
pk elle faisait rapport à la nature et aux animaux. Sa parlait d'équilibre….Sa faisait très spirituel et en mm tps sa me donnait l'impression d'être un fervent défenseur de la justice et des droits naturels… mais sa serait plus mes espérance dans mon cas pk je suis pas nn plus un écolo... »

xvi « mon persoo c ma création et c moi qui l'évolue… a la base je voulé un orc mes mes pote étai a l'aliance alors on ma it pren un humain moi jaime pas trop leur tete alr je m'équipe a fond pour camouflé sa tete »

xvii « Il y a une certaine part de moi dans mon paladin … Le défeneur de la lumière ca correspond assez a la vision que j'ai de moi…Par contre mon démoniste est tout le contraire de mon image personnelle mentale : moche petit et méchant »

xviii « Je suis qui je veut quand je joue, Je peut donc rester normal, ou faire chier, ou faire mon loveur, on s'en fout puisqu'il y a pas bcp de risques »

xix « [Oxxia]: Quel part de toi mets-tu dans ton avatar ?

 [Azeona]: je reste moi même. Mon avatar n'est qu'une facade, lorsque je joue, forcément, je vais sur des programmes comme mumble, Teamspeak, et c'est alors forcément la part "réelle" de moi qui s'exprime… Le personnage est une facade, pas une cachette. Une facade parce que dans ce jeu il en faut une, elle exprime forcément mes gouts (coiffire etc) mais pas ma personnalité »

xx « [Oxxia]: c'est un échappatoire pour toi ?

 [Paos]: surtout de parler de chose de moi, personnelle, a travers un avatar, un faux, un perso c'est vrai que c'est bizarre mon perso = un masque plutôt genre comme ce que j'aimerais être ou ce que j'aimerais paraître et me cacher en même temps parce que normalement je ne parle pas de moi avec »

xxi « ce perso-là est féminin parce que j'ai créé l'histoire comme ça mais je suis un homme ^^ »

xxii « le plus souvent je vais faire des personnages filles parce que je suis une fille ^^

j'aime bien me faire un perso humain ou dranei y'a un coté esthétique que je préfère chez eux… sur mes deux premiers personnages j'ai mis certains de mes traits et ensuite je me suis plutôt amusé a "jouer a la styliste" sur les autres on va dire »

xxiii « [Oxxia]: et les dotes-tu de traits de carcactères propres ?

[Dõumdõum] : Arf …le RP à disparu le jour ou blizard à decidé de rajouter une lettre à ses serveur "N Rp",du coup la normalité à pris le dessus et donner un phrasé ou un genre à son perso n'a plus eu aucun sens :(

…

 [Oxxia]: est ce que tu profites de ton avatar pour modifier certains de tes traits ? genre, âge, etc. ?

 [Dõumdõum]: Beurk,non,je ne comprend d'ailleurs pas le fait de jouer un sexe feminin par un masculin (encore peu croisé l'inverse) »

xxiv « il m'arrive de pas dire que je suis une fille lol parce que les mecs dans wow sont beaucoup trop au taquet, et ils vont un peu de zelle une fois qu'ils le savent »

xxv « en raid ils n'acceptent que des adultes donc je me fais passer plus vieux que mon age »

xxvi « [Malonever]: n'étant pas fervent fan de l'univers heroic fantaisy j ai pris express un personnage a peau noir ce qui a mon sens est rarement évoqué dans cet univers

[Oxxia]: et tu n'es pas noir dans ta vie actuelle

[Malonever]: non, si tu veux encore des precision jai tjrs aimer cacher mon visage et ma couleur de peau.. forcément mon perso me ressemble un peu vu ke c moi kil le joue… il est donc plutot tétu »

xxvii « J'espère sinon la guilde n'aurait pas raison d'être !!!! »

xxviii « … je ne pense pas que j'irais jusque là »

xxix « Meme si il faut que les gens pensent pareil pour avoir des affinitées »

xxx « Non je ne noue pas d'amitié virtuel,j'utilise le systeme,un peu moin que certains mais quand meme un peu »

xxxi « nn je ne m'attache pas ce n'est qu'un jeu »

xxxii « Si je quitte la guilde, certains pourront peut etre pincés, mais jamais on ne m'en voudra comme a un esclave qui quitte son maitre… La guilde c'est pas une famille selon moi, c'est un foyer d'accueil… Une guilde, c'est avoir le plaisir de tromber des boss avec des gens qu'on apprécie ».

xxxiii « kand on parle on a juste en dessous de notre nom "Les Fondateurs d'Azeroth"

alors forcément on essaie kand mm de soigner l'image de la guilde ».

xxxiv « tu "représentes" la guilde : on a un "tabard" premier signe d'appartenance

on a aussi le nom de la guilde en dessous de son nom ».

xxxv « le tabard est sympa, puis l'ambiance aussi mais le tabard il est monstrueux :p

Rose avec un coeur rouge dessus c'était marrant quoi ».

xxxvi « Prends l'exemple d'Azura ^^ ils sont dans le même délire, ils s'entendent bien. Leur "signe distinctif" c'est par exemple d'immiter le language troll ».

xxxvii « un peu comme du patriotisme mais bcp moin poussé fo pas abused non plus pk le patriotisme c juste ke tu es de cette nationalité tu es constament dans ce pays alors tu as forcément envie de le protégé et mm si tu rencontre des salop t usais ke c ton pays alors ka la guilde si une personne te fais chier , vu kon est 70 , cdéja une personne de trop »

xxxviii « quand on rentre dans une guilde, on formule un accord tacite ce passage te donne un sentiment d'appartenance dans la jungle pixellisée…tu peux compter sur les membres de ta guilde »

xxxix « le respect des autres joueurs (que ce soit en terme d'optimisation personnelle pour ne pas les ralentir mais aussi de partage d'informations pour qu'ils s'optimisent) »

xl « je veu vraiment la perfection. On partage le meme but la perfection du personnage armur , arme pouvoir etre reconnu »

xli « une idée de "on veut avancer" tout en respectant le fait qu'on ne peut pas obliger une personnes à être présente 5 soirs semaines de 20h à 00h00 »

xlii « un comportement qui est malsain chez une personne peut poser pb à toute une guilde…ces comportements sont en général les suivants : voler (ninja), mentir, laisser tomber des gens de sa guilde »

xliii « J'en sais rien, je trouve juste que c'est classe de tomber du boss sans se vanter. Je trouve qu'en ce moment toutes les bonnes guildes, alliance du moins, ne se vantent pas ! »

xliv « C'est ma premiere vraie guilde je dirais. Une guilde ou il y a beaucoup d'entraide, ou on a besoin de quelque cghose, quelqu'un l'a… ce genre de chose »

xlv « J'essaie de suivre la voie du moindre mal et je suis intolérant quand je croise des joueurs qui ne sont là que pour évoluer même si ca doit être au détriment des autres. »

xlvi « oui très important car le fet ke beaucoup de personne te reconaissent forte augmente ta cote de popularité »

xlvii « on ne partage que du jeu, mais dans la bonne ambiance »

xlviii « la grosse différence c'est surtout entre "nous" et les gens qui prennet ça trop au sérieux par exemple quand on voit le nombre de rageux dans les champs de batailles c'est hallucinant ils s'amusent plus vraiment alors qu'au final c'est le but »

xlix « le plus imortant pour nous c'est le jeu et l'amusement pas commes d'autres guildes que je ne citerais pas qui se déchirent de l'intérieru »

l « la faculté de relativiser (si un boss ne tombe pas c'est pas la fin du monde…) »