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### Playful identity in game design and open-ended play

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# Playful Identities

*The Ludification of  
Digital Media Cultures*



EDITED BY VALERIE FRISSEN,  
SYBILLE LAMMES, MICHEL DE LANGE,  
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## 5. Playful identity in game design and open-ended play

*Menno Deen, Ben Schouten & Tilde Bekker*

### Introduction

*At the end of the 1980s, a thorough analysis of Go games played by Hiroshi Yamauchi conducted by a specialist enabled the latter to draw Yamauchi's psychological profile: the former president of Nintendo was thus described as an unusual nonconformist, a visionary endowed with acute intuition, great (sometimes excessive) self-confidence and nimble-mindedness which enabled him to accept and amend his mistakes straight away.*

Gorges and Yamazaki 2010

Gamers are, like Yamauchi, described as nonconformist, creative, and self-confident persons, who seem unafraid to make mistakes (Beck and Wade 2004). Is it true that games present us with an opportunity to develop a particular identity, or are specific people attracted to games that create these opportunities? In the last decade, research has been conducted into the (playful) organizational style of gamers, and into the leadership qualities that may be developed in a game (DeMarco, Lesser, and O'Driscoll 2007; Reeves and Malone 2007). The search for an answer to the above question is the aim of this chapter. To be more specific, we would like to better understand identity construction and representation. For this reason we would like to further elaborate on the notion of *playful identity* as discussed in the introductory chapter of this volume. In contrast to other identity constructs, a playful identity characterizes someone's ludic activities without immediately discussing the valuing and moralizing practices arising from these activities.

According to Goffman (1959), identity is based on interaction: a fluid, active process, depending on the context of the actions and individual differences (gender, class, ethnicity, etc.). It consists of independent and partial sub-identities, which are constructed anew in everyday life. Identity and interests are not, as Habermas (1992) supposed, settled within the private world, and consequently brought fully formed into the public sphere. Today's blurring of the "private" and "public sphere" has an influence on this. In

many cases, identity is constituted through experiences, conflicts, and other interactions. In this way, information and communication technologies (ICT) can be seen as tools that support these actions. Today's individuals build and maintain social networks through which they "negotiate" their identities (Lamb and Davidson 2002).

In the last decade, identity information shifts from being published (self-presentation) to being negotiated, interacted, co-created, and played upon. The latter is of most interest to us as designers and new media researchers, since it signifies the most crucial change in today's interactions. To understand this process better, we will adopt Varnelis' (2008) concept of "networked publics". In a networked public space, people interact with their identity information, and the identity of others. According to Varnelis, these public spaces are restructured by networked technologies. Networked publics serve many of the same functions as other types of publics. The term "publics" foregrounds a more engaged and interactive stance (Ito 2008). It is an alternative for terms such as consumers and audiences. Networked publics allow people to gather for social, cultural, and civic purposes and they help people connect with a world beyond their close friends and family.

We will focus mainly on (game) mediated and networked identities, which we define as multilayered identity relations established through a network and interacted through new media like games, social networks, new media, etc. Within these environments, identity relations are in many cases a mix of strong and weak ties. Strong and weak ties are distinguished by a "combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services which characterize the tie" (Granovetter 1983, 1361).

In more historical notions of identity, accountability and reliability, among others – carefully constructed over time – play an important role. In modern identity construction, (instant) meaningfulness is of increased significance. This (instant) meaningfulness can, for example, be established by playing the same games in social networks including *Mafia Wars* (Zynga 2008), *Pet Society* (Playfish 2009), or *Restaurant City* (Electronic Arts 2009), or by participating in other activities like chat, MSN, Skype, etc., or by belonging to the same interest groups. In social games like *FarmVille* (Zynga 2009), identities are reshaped through collaborations around certain thematic activities. Within these online games a friend's value corresponds to his or her instant meaningfulness in the game. To be a friend in *FarmVille*, means to be of value. A friend transforms into a sort of commodity, friends become assets to play the game. This directly ties in with the social rules

on social networks, in which someone's popularity, or "value", is qualified by his/her number of friends.

This chapter is organized as follows. In the next section we will consider identity construction with respect to young people and discuss the notion of self-esteem. Then we will define the notion of a playful identity, while in the following section we discuss this in the framework of gaming and open-ended play, respectively. We will then look at some design challenges before presenting our conclusion.

## Identity construction among children

Almost all of today's children play computer games (Haan and Pijpers 2010), and they are becoming engaged in online social networks like Hyves and Facebook at an increasingly earlier age. To better understand the actions within these social networks and games, we will take a look at one of the most well-known theories about identity development by psychosocial theorist Erik Erickson.

Erickson argues that people's identities are developed and formed by their experiences in life (Berk 2009). People go through phases, and have to resolve a conflict in each phase. How the crisis is resolved influences how their identity is shaped. Individuals' sense of self is closely related to their sense of self-esteem.

According to Erickson, this is especially true for children that are seven to eleven years old and attending elementary school. These children are in the *industry* versus *inferiority* phase. Children in this phase are developing their sense of *self-esteem*. When children have positive experiences working and collaborating with others they build up a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) and become industrious while they are performing tasks. However, if children have negative experiences, are presented with negative feedback, and feel they are unable to meet people's demands, then they are more likely to develop a sense of inferiority.

Around the age of twelve, according to Erickson, children gradually shift from childhood to adulthood. This phase is called *identity* versus *confusion* (12-19 years old). Here children start exploring their future role in the world, and what they deem as personally valuable. They explore different variations that can result in commitment to a particular identity.

Then between the age of seventeen and twenty-two they go through the *intimacy* versus *isolation* phase. This is related to the ability of early adults to make a permanent commitment to an intimate partner

(Berk 2009). Such commitments require them to give up some of their independent self and redefine their identity to adjust it partly to the values and interests of their partner. They explore relationships leading toward longer-term commitments with someone other than, for example, family members. A successful completion of this phase can contribute to comfortable relationships and a sense of commitment, safety, and care within a relationship.

As children grow up, they are better able to examine more complex problems and to understand the world from other peoples' perspectives (Selman 1980). They also start examining their role in a wider sense in relation to the world. Young children (3-6 years old) understand that other people can have different thoughts and feelings than they do themselves, but they can easily confuse the two.

When they become older they gradually develop an understanding that people may have a different perspective of the world because they have access to various information sources. Around the age of ten to fifteen they develop the ability to look at the world from a three-way perspective. In other words, they can imagine in a sense how a third person might look at the situation where the child itself and a second person play a role.

Selman's theory describes how children of fourteen years and older develop the ability to understand that a third-party perspective can be influenced by larger societal values. They become aware of their individuality and of being an autonomous agent in an increasingly networked world of other autonomous actors (Castells 2002). This self-determined behavior is closely related to a sense of self-esteem. People's sense of self-esteem and sense of self are influenced by the feedback from others. As children grow older, they slowly develop a more nuanced view about their own self-esteem. Furthermore, they develop a hierarchically structured sense of self-esteem, which integrates aspects of academic competence, social competence, athletic competence, and physical appearances (Berk 2009). Children and adults can be in different stages of how fixed they are in their identity development.

One's identity is a constant state of flux. The aforementioned phases are therefore not as rigid and formalized as this section might have suggested. James Marcia's (1980) research about different identity statuses amongst adolescents confirms that some adolescents are still exploring diverse values and goals for their lives, whereas others are already very committed to their developed identity. Thus people can be in different phases of identity development that might influence how open they are for exploring alternative identities with related value sets.

## Narratologists versus ludologists: A definition of a playful identity

We recognize similar phases in the way people can play with their identity in games. In the literature, the identity construct that caught our attention was the concept of “narrative identity”. According to Ricoeur, a narrative structure (story) is not only a metaphor to describe the personal identity, it is also a way for human beings to construct their identity (Rasmussen 1995). Using stories we can quell the heterogeneity in our lives or, to put it differently, a narrative can help us unifying ourselves.

The construction of something new, by restructuring the existing, seems inherent to play (Deen and Schouten 2010). A playful identity has the quality to restructure itself according to the experiences one encounters.

In *Life on the screen: Identity in the age of the Internet*, Sherry Turkle writes, “If there is no underlying meaning, or a meaning we shall never know the privileged way of knowing can only be through an exploration of surfaces” (1997, 47). For Turkle, players discover that the idea of a unified self (identity) is not always valid. By engaging in role-playing, for example, one can see that multiple characters (or identities) can be explored and played out. In this sense, the ludic identity has a divergent nature, unlike a narrative identity.

Although one’s playful (ludic) identity can be consistent with one’s values, emotional state, or moral code, a playful identity does not necessarily have to be consistently defined. For example, an aggressive posture will supposedly confirm to high-paced (i.e. aggressive) activity. However, many playful activities can be conducted within a contradicting posture, happiness or eagerness, as well. A playful identity differs from narrative identity, as it does not necessarily include moral codes of behavior; instead it stipulates the way a person approaches and negotiates with a particular procedure or set of objects and rules.

The question arises, then, how games stimulate the identification within the gameplay, if playful activities in games mainly concern the restructuring of game objects, goals, and environments? Gameplay remains enclosed in a system of rules and regulations that are difficult to breach. Players interact not only with the game, but actively negotiate with game designers, other players, and its connected discourse. Copier (2007) describes this negotiation as a system of communication: a continuous negotiation of (role) players with a socio-cultural network of human and inhuman actors. Clearly, if players are able to (partly) internalize the game experiences that are embedded in the negotiation with the game and its community, the internalization may influence the players’ identity. Even more, if players can

restructure actors and negotiate with personal values then the influence on their identity may be even more eminent.

In the following section, we will elaborate on these issues and discuss some of the elements that allow the internalization of values in gaming and open-ended play. Play seems more open to the continuous negotiation of rules and communication practices than any other activity. It is therefore a well-suited activity to influence today's flexible identity.

## Games and self-esteem

Cognitive psychologists Przybylski, Rigby, and Ryan (2009; 2010) allocate the satisfaction of a need for "competence" to video games. As such, self-esteem seems inherently connected to video games through feedback systems that signify players' progression and failure. As Przybylski et al. point out: "[G]ames have become more sophisticated in how they provide performance feedback and acknowledge the prowess of players" (2010, 156). What is more, the increasing difficulty of a game is similar to a learning curve. Games educate gamers to overcome the game's obstacles, building gradually to increase a player's sense of self-esteem in relation to the activity at hand.

The visual feedback, however, is more easily recognized and discussed. This becomes clear in recent debates about positive and negative reinforcements in game design (Hecker 2010). These discussions especially concern visual (or textual) feedback like the achievement system of the Xbox Live. Although some gamers identify themselves as "achievement addicts" the system seems capricious in granting rewards compared to the work done to accomplish them. Many players who at first identify themselves as Xbox Live achievement addicts seem later to abandon their addict-identity.

Initially people can identify themselves with the Xbox Live achievement system. However, the individual players' inadequacy when compared to their overstated qualifications to accomplish specific objectives can result in the abandonment of the game, which influences the player's sense of self-esteem. In a way Xbox 360 gamers are at the mercy of a capricious system since players are rewarded equally for watching their first cinematic game or for having Superman fly 10,000 miles (which is a serious accomplishment). The capricious nature of Xbox Live achievements seems to make it hard to retrieve a sense of self-esteem from the game's feedback. Consequently, the system complicates the identification with the gameplay.

As mentioned above, games do not only facilitate a sense of self-esteem through the use of feedback. The way a game is designed to create an

optimal flow offers players gameplay that is, presumably, always within the reach of their ability. Recent breakthroughs in adaptive gameplay affect self-esteem as well. Most notable in this regard is the horror surviving game *Left 4 Dead* (Certain Affinity and Valve Corporation 2008), where the artificial intelligence, dubbed *the Director*, adapts the level of difficulty in accordance with the player's skill and position in the field.

Another example are fighting games. In games like *Mortal Kombat* (Midway 1993), gamers need to perform specific button patterns to succeed in the game. *Mortal Kombat* stands out from other fighting games, as the game does not reward the act of randomly and vigorously hitting buttons ("button mashing"). Within the genre of fighting games, players identify themselves by their ability to execute difficult button combinations. *Sub-Zero's* fatality illustrates the difficult button combinations well: Hold Low Punch, Back, Back, Down, Forward, Release Low Punch. *ButtonMashers* are considered inexperienced players or *noobs*, as a quote from the UrbanDictionary illustrates: "WTF N3WB13!!! U R 5UCH A BUTToN MA5H3R!! I M SOOOO MoR3 L33T THAN U!!!!!!!" (n3rdma5t3r5000and1 2009). The quote translates as: "What the fuck newbie! You are such a ButtonMasher! I am so more leet (better) than you are!" Clearly, ButtonMashers are not only perceived as inexperienced players, but they are also considered to spoil the play experience of more experienced players as well. Winning by randomly hitting buttons curtails the value of the experienced player's dexterity in hitting complex button combinations. ButtonMashing devaluates the gameplay. Consequently, experienced players may have difficulty in retrieving a sense of self-esteem from the match. Players are clearly identifying themselves here with their gameplay.

## Gameplay and identity

To transcend the debates on feedback systems and discuss players' identification with gameplay, an analysis of the game genre seems an appropriate start. Gamers often identify themselves with a specific genre like "sports games" or "shooters". However, the identification seems to be still stronger when it relates to a specific style of play, like the aforementioned ButtonMashing. A genre relates to what Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004) dubbed aesthetics (emotional responses to gameplay, moral values, cultural expressions etc.) and possible dynamics (possibilities and actual play emerging from the negotiation with games' rules and regulations) of the game. The style of play concerns the underlying mechanics' and the *actual* dynamics.

We argue that it would be more interesting to research dynamics and to some extent aesthetics in order to discuss identity constructs. Players can identify with gameplay and represent their identity in various ways. We will elaborate on some of them. First, the concept of high scoring and play recordings will be discussed. Second, we look at how gamers tend to name their character in accordance with the dynamics of the play, thereby presenting an ambiguity concerning the discussion of dynamics. The aesthetics and dynamics seem interrelated and intertwined in a complex way. Nevertheless, in light of understanding playful identity it seems fruitful to discuss various playing styles. We suggest that to understand a playful identity better, we need more appropriate names for playing styles, names that transcend the moralizing and valuing tones of most game research.

### *High scores and play recordings*

In early game design, the concept of High Score Lists often describes the end goals met by a gamer. This is especially true for pinball machines, which can be considered the first arcade games to adopt high-scoring lists (DeMaria and Wilson 2003). Ever since Exidy (1979) launched *Star Fire*, the first arcade game with a personalized high score list, high-scoring lists have become an even greater part of one's identity. Posting one's high scores was slowly gaining popularity in game magazines in the early 1990s. To prove one's high score, gamers were asked to videotape their game session. Gamers then started to negotiate the game's dynamics by sharing each other's play sessions.

Game designers quickly seemed to recognize this and created software to record complete play sessions for the benefit of play-training. Especially racing games are known for their ability to record play sessions. For example, *Super Mario Kart* (Nintendo EAD 1992) offers gamers the opportunity to race their "ghost" in a time trial. Consequently, other genres like *action-adventures* (*TombRaider* [N-Gage edition] Core Design 1995) offered players the possibility to share their speed run.

The game *Demon's Souls* (From Software 2009) extends the developments of speed run communities. Players can leave *bloodstains* that can be activated by others to show a ghost playing out the player's final moments. Reviewing the player's death may help others to avoid the same fate in advance. *Demon's Souls'* bloodstains strengthen the game's educational system by incorporating the successful strategies of other players. By analyzing the

ghost of another, or leaving their bloodstain behind, players both develop and represent a gamer's sense of self-esteem without relying on end goals, but specifically negotiating about the game's dynamics.

Lastly, the user-generated gaming platform *Little Big Planet 2* (Media Molecule 2010) elevates social negotiations about dynamics even further. Not only can players enjoy the dynamics designed by other players, they can actually construct their *own*. This results in heated debates about the gameplay of user-generated games, but more importantly, in an intense amount of appraisal of other players' designed dynamics.

Here we signify a transcendence from the *industry* versus *inferiority* phase to the *identity* versus *confusion* phase. Players explore various variations on existing games by (re)creating them. This can result in the commitment of a player to a particular playing style, or the exploration of new and unknown playful identities. Furthermore, players are able to review the work of others, and gradually develop an awareness that other gamers may have a different understanding of the game. They develop the ability to look at games from a three-way perspective; in line with Selman's (1980) theory, players can imagine how a third person enjoys a game and how a third-party perspective can be influenced by the larger game community.

As this becomes more clear, gamers retrieve their sense of self-esteem not only from audio-visual feedback (achievements) and social negotiations (high score lists), but also from actual gameplay (the dynamics) as well. This is an important aspect of the playful identity, as a playful identity can represent itself through dynamics in very various ways.

### *Naming and playing styles*

The aforementioned identity signifiers, including high scores, play recordings, and the ability to play together (competitive or cooperative), offer players a way to develop and represent their identity. However, how this playful identity is represented has not yet been discussed. One signifier of the playful identity is one's *name*. Although we do not know how naming practices originally transpired, it is safe to assume that names often have a meaning.

Many nicknames in games relate to the game's narrative and theme (i.e. the aesthetics). This partly explains identifying processes. However, a *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004) character/player name like *BritneySpear* does not relate to the *World of Warcraft* lore whatsoever.

Instead, it brings the identification process (the identification with a pop star), happening outside the game's magic circle, into the game itself.

When names do relate to the in-game theme they can also express one's game role. In *HalfLife: Counter-Strike* (Le and Cliffe 1999), a player named *Lt. Sniper* will probably camp on strategic places in the game world to shoot passersby with a sniper rifle, instead of running around shooting others with a shotgun.

Lastly, naming practices seem related to the quality of the gameplay itself. Names in the fast-paced game *Counter-Strike* are surprisingly shorter than names in the time-consuming game *Ikariam* (GameForge 2006). This suggests that gamers identify with both the (slow/fast) gameplay and the narrative. In turn, players may develop and represent themselves accordingly.

One's playing style seems an important identifier of one's personality. Notable in this regard is the work of Allesandro Canossa (2005; 2007; 2008). Canossa deduces various *playing styles* from *Hitman* (IO Interactive 2007) playing sessions, and has named each playing style in accordance with a culturally fitting persona. A *Dirty Harry*, for example, will not take appropriate precautions before heading into a building to kill its target (like *Lt. Sniper* would). Instead, the person will expect to enter a building "head on – guns blazing".

Linguistic research into game player/character naming may prove to be a useful approach for better understanding playful identity, as it is an exploration of "surfaces" (Turkle 1997). However, the analysis of play recordings seems a more logical and direct approach to research dynamics and their associated playful identity, as deducing playing styles from actual gameplay seems closer to the actual style of play than naming does. What is profound in these examples is that naming and playing styles do not refer to the player's proficiency in gaming, but to the way the game is explored and how this playful identity is expressed to the public.

## Open-ended play

Constructs such as self-expression, exploration of one's favored playing style, and commitment to a particular playful identity may present game designers with new principles for design. Developmental psychologists Jarvis, Brock, and Brown describe how play "emphasizes the restructuring, enrichment and discovery [by players, such that they can build] on personal experiences and knowledge to create new concepts and experiences"

(2008, 25). It is through this restructuring that new forms of meaning are constructed.

We already signified a change in game design, like *Little Big Planet 2* and *Minecraft*. In these open-ended game environments players explore various facets of their playful identity. In this section, we will elaborate more on open-ended play environments where no predefined rules of play are provided and which present more opportunities for self-expression and exploration.

The idea of computer aided open-ended play is inspired by theories about situated action (Lave 1988; Nardi 1996; Suchman 1987). Instead of designing for goal-directed behavior, as is assumed by Norman's (1990) action cycle, the situated action model assumes that players do not structure their activity beforehand, but that the activity grows as the interaction in the context of use occurs. People are opportunistic as they interact with the world.

One research prototype that was designed according to the open-ended play philosophy is the *ColorFlare* (Bekker, Sturm, and Eggen 2010; Bekker and Sturm 2009; see Figure 1). These objects can detect whether they are shaken or rolled. They provide feedback to players by changing color. Children can explore how the *ColorFlare* responds to their own movements. Furthermore, children can allocate meaning to the different types of feedback, thus creating their own game rules and goals. The *ColorFlare* emits one of six colors at a time, chosen in random order. When it is rolled, its light changes to a different color. When it is shaken, the light starts blinking for five seconds. While the *ColorFlare* is blinking, it is able to transmit its color to another *ColorFlare* in the vicinity using infrared technology. The other *ColorFlare* then takes on the same color.

Another project that shows other opportunities in relation to exploring identity by examining social roles, was conducted by industrial design students at Eindhoven University of Technology on the *Ennea project* (Frens 2008). *Enneas* are little portable devices that measure and visualize social interactions between high school freshmen (12-13 year olds). Animal icons are used to visualize social roles. The icons visualize a representation of each pupil's social behavior and place them within a group, based on the diversity and intensity of their social interactions. There are no good or bad roles, there is no goal. The roles are there to provide a handle for reflection and discussion about differences between people and roles within a group. This allows pupils and teachers to collaboratively reflect on and discuss actual, real-life information. In this manner, they provide open-ended opportunities for children to search for other children with different social roles.



Fig. 1: Children who are trying to send the color of their *ColorFlares*.

What these examples have in common is that these intelligent open-ended play objects can provide children with opportunities to create their own game goals and game rules and in this way stimulate a more social play behavior since rules need to be negotiated. Players can adapt the meaning they allocate to input and output behaviors to the context in which they play. They can adapt the rules as they play to adjust to the challenge, or they can shift the whole game focus to another play script altogether. Therefore, the objects should have a level of abstraction to allow children to imagine them to be different real-world objects.

In the current design practice, no specific suggestions are provided to children to choose different role-playing games when they play with objects such as the *ColorFlares*. We have seen children come up with role-playing games when playing with open-ended objects, such as using the color feedback, to show how much power a child had playing a bear that was catching other children (Bekker, Sturm, and Eggen 2010). In the context

of most open-ended play objects, the meaning of the feedback in itself is undefined. We have seen various examples of children introducing scores to play scenarios in order to create a game that has a winner, which contributed to their sense of accomplishment.

An advantage is the fact that open-ended play objects offer a diversity of play activities and stimulate less compliant behavior. Children can practice different types of behavior through this emergent gameplay and thus develop different components of their sense of self-esteem, including their social, physical, and intellectual development.

To summarize we could say that in intelligent play objects players receive feedback about their behavior, either by technology (mediated) or directly from their playmates, which in many cases influences their sense of self-esteem allowing them to construct an understanding of how they are perceived by others.

### **Design requirements supporting a playful identity**

We are witnessing a transition in the game industry, game research and within the gamers' community that corresponds with Erickson's mature growth from childhood to early adulthood. Initially, games were a stage to "show-off" one's playing capabilities and, by doing so, develop a playful identity that is mainly based on a sense of self-esteem (what Erickson refers to as the industry – inferiority phase) that is derived from predescribed rules and goals, high-scoring lists, level completions, and the discovery of game secrets (Easter eggs, warp-zones, other short cuts). Now, the in-game development of these hard skills is slowly transforming into the practice and development of social skills. Whereas games were traditionally designed around combative strategies and dexterity skills (button combination, hand-eye coordinative tasks, etc.), socio-cultural values and norms are increasingly used in game design to enrich the playful activities. The design of gameplay for the development and practice of soft skills (communicating with the user base, connectedness, integrated in other activities and game culture, maintaining one's reputation and expressing oneself through other means than high scores alone) is in line with the development of other media, which are becoming increasingly social. In a way, we are witnessing a transition from the "industry versus inferiority phase" to the "identity versus confusion" phase. Games increasingly offer environments in which players explore their role in the (hybrid) game world. Moreover, open-ended play with innovative toys (like the *ColorFlare*)

also offer players the opportunity to individually decide what is of personal value and what is not.

This transition to a more mature game design is supported by facilitating more autonomous actions for gamers. For example, for games like *Tetris* (Pajitnov and Gerasimov 1984) or *Boom Blox Bash Party* (EA Los Angeles 2009) playing with boxes is traditionally facilitated through the design of predefined structures and attainable goals. In contrast, games like *Minecraft* (Persson 2009) offer many more ways for gamers to express and share their game environment with others and negotiate the restructuring of (in-game) practices. Moreover, in more user-oriented games, such as *Minecraft* or *Little Big Planet*, game designers pay more attention to self-expression, which is of increased interest to researchers.

Another important aspect of design is the relevancy of topics subject to gaming. Mature activities, like playing with intimacy, become of increasing interest in MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*. Intimate role-playing communities are developing in virtual worlds such as *Second Life* (Linden Lab 2003) and *IMVU* (IMVU Inc. 2009). In *World of Warcraft*, people play with the notions of marriage, role-played love, and sexuality (gender bending, online gay prides, etc.) In *Second Life* and *IMVU*, we find various communities that explore different facets of intimacy through diverse fetishisms (furrries, Gorge, etc.). As such, games gradually become a mature medium, offering diversity in play behavior (playing styles) to elicit the exploration of different identities and related values (identity states), which could facilitate alternative identities with related value sets, according to the theory of Marcia (1980).

Moreover stimulating different types of cognitive, social, and physical play opportunities in game design could consequently facilitate various playing styles that elicit insights about different components of self-esteem and self-concept, which, in accordance with Selman, help individuals to see the world from different perspectives. It seems that game culture, as a whole, pays more attention to the individual qualities of the gamer, an autonomous discipline in an increasingly networked world of autonomous actors.

Game designers can use several constructs to facilitate the development of what we call a playful identity. Designers can (1) provide reactive feedback opportunities that may influence the player's sense of self-esteem. Although today's (direct) achievement systems are rather capricious and therefore difficult to relate to, we see that the incorporation of developmental psychology constructs, such as scaffolding, the zone of proximal development, and the search for optimal flow, indirectly teaches players

to become proficient gamers, and as a result changes their sense of self-esteem. This is what Johnson (2005) dubbed the “sleeping curve”: the unconscious construction of (game) knowledge that might be applicable to other domains. We think it would be interesting to explore possibilities to transform this indirect knowledge construction to a more direct approach, and thereby facilitate active reflection and transfer from game knowledge to meta-knowledge.

What is more, the impact of a game on one’s self-esteem seems strengthened by (2) the design of an environment in which social negotiations between players, game designers, and the connected discourse are stimulated. Within this community, the practice of conflict resolution is facilitated by presenting players with (online) high scores, play recordings, forums, in-game chat-channels, and various multiplayer modes. This can be illustrated by the MMORPG EVE-Online (CCP Games 2003). The game developers created an election process to democratize the design of rules and regulations in the game. Furthermore, players themselves depict what are valuable spaces and goods in the game through active negotiations and discussion about in-game norms and values.

Additionally, games should (3) offer diversity in types of play. Since players can approach and resolve game-related issues in their own personal way, games increasingly offer various playing styles. This transforms the experience to a more personal one. Canossa’s research is notable in this regard. By offering players various styles of play, players can experiment and develop various strategies and personal styles, enhancing their individuality in accordance with their personality. The player’s personal style is often revealed to the community by naming a player’s character, or by creative-playful outlets (in for example *Little Big Planet* and *Minecraft*). The latter seems enhanced by open-ended games, which we discussed earlier.

Lastly (4), by offering players the opportunity for a more open-ended gameplay or focusing on a more emergent gameplay, games can facilitate the exploration of different identities through role-play. The tension between prestructured and unstructured gameplay relates to the strictness of the gameplay and the rule set. It consequently determines the extent to which certain playful activities (and identity constructive practices) emerge. This emergent gameplay is also determined by the open or closed nature of the game (e.g. to play a game amongst friends or anonymously). A social environment forces players into a specific role that suits their abilities in accordance with the negotiated theme or gameplay. Designers may ask themselves if they want the goals of the game to be fixed or

multi-interpretable. They may also want to consider if the goals should suggest a (measured) identity status or whether the players themselves should negotiate the value of games, goals, rules, or activities.

The above-mentioned constructs range from targeting self-esteem to autonomous activities. Their impact may be enhanced through active negotiation about presented feedback, various playing styles, and the interpretation of game units, such as rules, goals, environments, and play objects. All contribute to the development of an individual's playing style, which in turn corresponds to one's personality.

## Conclusion

In this chapter we studied the influence of modern gameplay on identity. We have seen that in modern society, identity is constructed through an instant reiterative process. Social media like Facebook and Twitter mainly provide opportunities for social interaction, and some games focus on solving cognitive skills. Although games do not allow for the construction of personal information directly (besides naming and creating small profiles), they enable identity expression and development through other means such as gameplay, role-play, interactive attributes, measures, and other (non-verbal) forms of communication.

Insights taken from psychology, social studies, and media theory can enrich game designs. However, we find more research is needed to provide a grounded theory and design practice. Finally, in this paper we examined whether open-ended play can stimulate a wider diversity of play activities and influence the development of a more playful identity. We found that in open-ended play children do seem to practice different types of behavior and thus develop different components of their sense of self-esteem, including their social, physical, and intellectual abilities.

## Notes

1. Mechanics are a synonym for the "rules" of the game (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2004). These are the constraints under which the game operates. How is the game set up? What actions can players take, and what effects do those actions have on the game state? When does the game end, and how is a resolution determined? These are defined by the mechanics.

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