

Jason Arold
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IE179 - Gender and Computer Games

It Seems Like Everyone Has a Shiny Blue Sword These Days
Illusory uniqueness in MMORPGs

Psychologists such as Carl Rogers, Erich Fromm, Sigmund Freud, and Karl Jung dealt with clients that had lost their perspective of self. Controlled by society, their patients expressed in great detail the ambiguity they felt about themselves. The work of these psychologists attempted to analyze what constituted a self in modern culture. With increasing populations across the world and corporate Nothingness becoming the standard, anonymity is almost a requirement in modern society. In massively multiplayer on-line role playing games (MMORPGs), players must choose an avatar or a representative of themselves in a computerized world. In order to provide the players of these games with adequate feeling of identification and uniqueness within the world, game programmers made design choices that they felt provided adequate resourced for each player to create a unique identity. Through understanding these systems of character creation in MMORPGs, we can better understand the creation of identity in our own society and what systems are in place to allow us to define ourselves, and, most notably, what tools may be missing.

There are multiple schools of thought for definition of self. Materialist definitions suggest that “I [subject] have O [object]’ expresses a definition of I through my possession of O.” As a result, “the subject is not myself but I am what I have. My property constitutes myself and my identity.”¹ An individual is thus composed of his or her collection of property. Other common identity definitions rely not on property, but on experience. Buddhist philosophy and modern Western psychology suggest that “consciousness is a reaction or response which has one of the six faculties as its basis, and one of the six corresponding external phenomena as its object.”² Identity here is an experience and a summation of experiences and reactions.

¹[Fromm, 1976] p77

²[Rahula, 1959] p23

A person experiences him or herself as the subject of his or her activity and input ³. These acts and inputs come from our specific place in the world around us and our specific set of abilities and senses. As a result, ego formation and identification of self are dependent upon relationship and identification with surrounding people and objects ⁴.

From combining these philosophies, we arrive at a common concept of self. The notion of self is the summation of experiences and actions of a specific, physical body in an environment. Since any elements of inherent self, such as souls or genetic personality programming, are removed from this definition, as they are absent from most modern theories, then self is purely an experience of a being rather than a characteristic of one. It is a set of actions and responses rather than an inherent quality. As a result, when looking at MMORPGs as well as real life, we differentiate characters by the actions they perform and the experiences they have. Uniqueness is the singular summed experience one being has that no other one has. What we find in MMORPGs, however, is that there is no uniqueness by this definition, only the illusion of uniqueness. While human interaction within the game often allows characters to have unique conversations with other players, these game elements are external to the game rather than inherent in the system. Our analysis here looks solely at in-game mechanics and their enabling of identity formation. We conclude that there are no unique actions, experiences, or characters in MMORPGs that aren't the direct result of outside input such as other players. Extending this hypothesis to a globalized society, then we can also suppose that existence of human uniqueness is doubtful and as we interact less and less with humans and more and more with non-humans, the barriers protecting us from uniformity become weaker.

MMORPGs profess to allow the user to create a unique character through several sections of game mechanics. In the processes of character creation, skill selection, in-game property ownership, and general 'adventuring', these games provide the illusion of uniqueness. Char-

³[Fromm, 1976] p91

⁴[Freud, 1989] p639

acter creation is the first of these and the first step the player makes before entering the world. In World of Warcraft, Everquest II, and Dark Age of Camelot, creation begins with race selection. Race selection allows the player to choose from a variety of different forms. Each race also usually has its own strengths and weaknesses, as well as its own physical appearance. In World of Warcraft, the player can choose between the thin, slender Night Elves which are more agile than other races, the burly, strong cow-like Tauren, the short yet magically-adept gnomes, or from a variety of other races. Other games provide similar selections with each race having certain strengths over the others. This racial segregation mimics antiquated real-world cultural definitions as well. Ashley Montague comments that “the conception of differential selection for mental qualities seems to be a peculiarly modern one, adapted to modern prejudices,”⁵ and yet MMORPGs maintain the idea that different races should have different abilities. While most racial selection within a MMORPG is a difference of specialization, qualities are often based on real-life physical ethnic patterns. The short, thin Erudites in Everquest 2 are adept at intellect and have features reminiscent of Asian cultures. Dark Age of Camelot features the burly Highlanders who wear kilts, definitively Scottish, and are strong but unintelligent. This primary segregation of race enforces the idea that racial association is the first and most important attribute in defining a new being and the experiences that one will have. In these games, race is intrinsically linked with the gaming experience a character will have and thus an important element in identity formation.

Race selection also serves to provide a selection method for starting location, which can define initial experiences in the world, but a player is usually free to move about the rest of the world and join other characters. There are few exceptions to this rule such as games like World of Warcraft and Everquest in which race is also tied heavily with faction, and some zones are limited to certain factions. Players who choose one race over another will

⁵[Montagu, 1997] p129

explore different areas at different times, but most players will experience most of the same locations within a game world and racial selection serves mainly to segregate initial player populations and thereby providing a wider variety of initial experiences.

Race selection in and of itself summarizes the bulk of the initial character creation process. The remaining customization is selection of a class from a limited list and definition of physical attributes, as well as a name. Initial identity begins by an almost genetic selection of physical and quantifiable characteristics. The uniqueness of a character is simply the numerical selections the player makes when creating the character, such as hair color and appearance. There are few options for customization outside of selection boxes with limited amounts of choices, and thus no character is guaranteed to be unique from the beginning. Hair color, facial components, class, race, and all other initial selections are quantifiable and available to every player, thus no two players are guaranteed to be physically unique. Additionally, all combinations of races, classes, and physical attributes are universal to all players, so the creation process itself introduces a way to distinguish players but does not in any way allow the creation of unique characters. The trend of selection within a pre-defined set of options as a means of creating an illusion of uniqueness is one that appears throughout the entirety of the experience.

Once character creation is completed, the player enters the next phase of uniqueness-definition: gameplay. Upon entering the world, the player is given the first opportunity to explore his or her physical space. In the real world, “[self-recognition in a mirror] immediately gives rise in a child to a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relationship between the movements made in the image and the reflected environment, and between this virtual complex and the reality it duplicates – namely, the child’s own body, and the persons and even things around him.”⁶ This scenario is no different in MMORPGs. The player is almost always given simple tasks or tutorials to familiarize him or her with controls

⁶[Lacan, 2002] p2

and interaction with the game world. Just as a child forms his or her identity with the mirror image, the player also forms an on-line identity in these first few experiences acting as the character. However, there is no unique experience here either. All actions have been programmed and are limited to predetermined set. Most characters can usually do a few, limited tasks such as walk, attack, or talk. Thus, initial character identification is similar for all characters. In real life, this same limitation applies. Humans are limited to a certain number of actions as well, albeit a much wider selection to choose from.

Again, modern performative identity theory continues suggests that identity is based on action and experience rather than on inherent genetic or spiritual differences. In today's world, "we think of the individual as a conduit for power, something it acts on and through."

⁷ The individual is merely a body that exerts forces and has forces acting upon it, and is defined by its actions and reactions. Continuing with our definition of identity, every experience and opportunity for action the character has in an on-line RPG is another chance for the character to expand his or her identity away from others. These methods of deviation seem infinite, but yet fall into quantifiable categories, just as initial creation and identification did. The character can only interact with the game world through a limited set of actions pre-determined by programmers in advance, and therefore no character can ever have a unique action, suggesting that no character has a guarantee of uniqueness.

Skill selection is the most notable and arguably the most defining set of choices. In Dark Age of Camelot, at the completion of each level, the character is awarded with a certain number of skill points to allocate into new spells or abilities. The limited availability of training points such as these often forces a character to choose from a selection of skills. A Wizard can invest in a fire tree, an ice tree, or an earth tree. Each of these trees unlocks skills for the player to use. However, each skill is shared amongst other players. No character receives unique skills that others do not, and thus the expanded repertoire of available actions

⁷[Wilchins, 2004] p48

grows equally amongst all members of a class and no uniqueness is added to players.

Some games implement methods of forcing diversion within a class. These systems force a player to choose from a set of skills rather than awarding all available ones. A player can invest heavily in one school of training, but most games inhibit the player from mastering all trees equally. As a result, players become differentiated based on the school they choose. Unfortunately, regardless of the system of specialization, such as Talents or training points, there are a limited number of options available and sometimes there are even preferred allocations within a class. Called "Cookie Cutter builds," these are common plans for a character that have been deemed by the population to be the most effective at any given task. A fully specialized Fire Wizard in Dark Age of Camelot is the highest dealer of damage, and therefore the variations allowed by the Training Point system only seek to allow players to choose one of several different types of each class rather than pick a unique specialization that differs from all other characters in that class.

Through experience in the game, a player must still work within a system of boundaries by picking from limited available skills with a limited amount of points, all of which are options given to all other characters within the same class. Point allocation thus only serves to define specialization rather than uniqueness. If identity is partially the result of having unique actions, and no characters are receiving any unique abilities, then there is no guarantee for uniqueness amongst players.

Similar to class skills, a character is presented with a selection of professions. A player can choose to be a tailor, a blacksmith, an enchanter, and so on. The options are limited, and within each profession there are no unique recipes. All members of one profession can produce exactly the same items as any other members. Should a Warrior choose blacksmithing as a profession, there is no unique content that any one blacksmith will be able to provide that any other will not. While this system allows for another degree of specialization and a wide variety of specialized characters to emerge from one class, professions are chosen from

a limited number of options. Thus, professions are another place in which specialization is allowed, but no uniqueness is created as no unique actions or experiences are provided to the player.

Skills determine the majority of actions a character is able to perform, and thus the experience of gameplay is simply the combination of these available actions. There are methods in which the game world can provide additional input to the character in hopes of making the repetitious gameplay seem less one dimensional. Questing is one such method that encourages players to hunt a limited amount of enemies, run errands, or discover secrets about the game world. Quest-giving characters will often stress the urgency of the help of one specific character by saying his/her name or class, but this same speech is given to all characters with certain words altered. In most games, most quests are available to most classes and thus a warrior and wizard are essentially encouraged to do the same tasks in the same ways. Whether they must slay the required 10 gnolls using swords or spells, they both must slay 10 gnolls for the same hard-coded reasons. Despite the assurance by the quest-giving character that the player has made a difference and helped, any characters wizards or warriors who come after them will be offered the same quest with the same urgency. Large-scale changes are not allowed to any one character. Even group quests in which 70 or 80 people slay a unique dragon are unable to change the world, and the dragon will always reappear the next day as if nothing happened.

Additionally, quests are always given by the game masters and not the player. Should the player notice a large camp of Furbolgs and eliminate the problem, he/she cannot charge the town for his/her services unless specifically given a quest to eliminate the Furbolgs. The player is always in a subordinate role to the world and government, forced to accept tasks and the command of authority figures. Overthrowing thrones, setting one's own goals, or establishing player-run governments and towns is not an option in MMORPGs. The player feels a unique experience as he or she often receives a personalized quest assignment via text

inclusion of the character's name or class. However, all players who can receive the quest will receive the same instructions with the same wording. An individual's reputation or skill is never a determinant in quest specifics. The set of actions required to complete a quest is a sub-set of the actions available to the player, and the experience the player has in interacting with quests is universal amongst all players on that quest. Accomplishing a quest ends up being an assigned chain of experiences that all players will have and as a result, quests simply provide another place for a player to have a non-unique experience, but the personalization provides an illusory uniqueness.

Guild Play is perhaps the most unique experience a player can have in a MMORPG. Guilds allow groups of players to band together under a common symbol and name. They are given their own emblem, colors, and chat channel. They can determine their own rankings and promotion systems. Guilds can informally give quests to new players and often are allowed some form of property to claim. In Dark Age of Camelot, guilds can claim a house as their own, put trophies in it. They can claim castles and install guards to protect them. Many guilds also establish real-world web pages featuring epic stories of battles with giant monsters, player profiles, forums, and host their own events in the world. A player's guild association helps create one of the few unique experiences, although most of these involve working within the limited game dynamics rather than the creation of new content. Most events are modeled after quests given in game, such as a guild hunt for a dragon. With the limited availability of gameplay mechanics, most guilds must have the same guild events. Many guilds will hunt the same 'epic' creatures or do the same types of treasure hunts. Thus, the only defining quality becomes human interaction during events and frequency of such events. Human interaction isn't inherent in the system, it is added by players with subscriptions, so it can't be counted as one of the uniqueness-generating aspects of the game.

The last area in which a player can define him or herself is in personal property ownership. This system is split amongst ownership of on-character items as well as additional property

that exists elsewhere in the game world. A character is allowed to wear a certain amount of gear such as head pieces, rings, chest pieces, and so on. Each of these garments usually has its own visual effect and statistic bonus such as a blue glow and an increased resistance to a certain damage type. Characters can gather a 'unique' set of armor by creating their own personal combinations of available pieces. A player can emphasize resistance to frost or health regeneration, and these effects can create an illusory uniqueness. Again, however, no unique content is ever created by a player. Players can assemble their own, personalized sets of armor, but each piece is itself not unique and therefore the same set of garments can potentially be worn by any other player. Many players' unique wardrobes rely on simple rarity and over time the 'best' suits of armor are discovered and collected by many people and homogenization occurs. In Dark Age of Camelot, the dragon of each realm drops a set of armor. Assembling this set is difficult, but not impossible, and can be done by multiple players. All players in the game aspire to assembling this set, and more often than not all high-level players will be wearing similar, if not the same, sets of items.

Other property options, such as personal housing, are also available in some games. These are purely cosmetic and all players must purchase from pre-defined inventories to assemble and decorate their spaces. Suggesting that uniqueness is in some way defined by the set of property a character owns only reveals the same flaws as before. Since all items are pre-programmed, all players have equal opportunity to purchase from the same selection of items and it becomes possible for any two players to have the same set of property, showing that property itself is only a further illusion of uniqueness in the world. All categories in which the player has the ability to define him or herself from other players offer the promise of creating a unique experience. Unfortunately, the implementation of on-line role-playing games quantifies and limits all selections the player can make to a pre-defined set. Rather than having players create the majority of the experience, it is pre-programmed. Items are not uniquely generated, but are chosen from a coded set. The limited options provide no

guarantee of uniqueness provided through game mechanics.

We wonder how so many characters can feel as though they are having a unique experience when there is no guarantee that they are. It becomes both possible and likely that a player will encounter an exact copy of him or herself within the game world and yet players ignore this fact and continue to feel a close identification with their characters and only their characters. It seems that the illusion of uniqueness can be created by increasing available choices. Constraints on abilities, movement, and world-interaction do not inhibit a player's perception of uniqueness. Few players are bothered by the idea that someone can come by afterwards and complete the same quest for the head of a unique monster, wear the same outfit made of 'unique' items, or learn the same set of rare and powerful skills.

The modern world suffers the same flaws. We are limited in our movements by ever-increasing legal restrictions and means of movement. Culture-specific actions no longer exist with globalization as they become stage acts and fading traditions. In our own communities, we find no uniqueness either. We are faced with mass-globalization of goods and services, and each town in America seems to have the same offerings of experiences. Olive Gardens, McDonald's, T.G.I.Fs, and other such chains ensure that our eating experiences remain uniform through the use of premade food, scripted waiters, and homogenous decor. Walmarts, Costcos, Targets, and K-Mart's all make sure that we have the same objects in our homes by providing the same inventory in every store from the same company. Gaps, American Eagles, and Nordstroms ensure that we all look the same as well, again by providing standard inventory such as cargo shorts in April both in Long Beach and Anchorage. With the powers of a globalized market, the community-specific options dwindle and it becomes increasingly more likely for two people to own exactly the same things, eat exactly the same things, do exactly the same things, and be exactly the same person.

In society, the current options presented to us are complex and varied. We are provided with a wide selection of locations, jobs, objects, and roles. We feel as though we are part

of an evolving society. We often feel unique and special. Yet, when considering the illusory uniqueness in MMORPGs, we wonder how much of our experience is similar to this. On further analysis, we are limited by our bodies, our economic class, and our environment. As franchises dominate over indigenous establishments, the selection of places to eat and objects to own become increasingly homogenous throughout the world. Events become scripted, and the neighborhood restaurateur becomes a non-person “who does not act as if he or she is a person, does not interact with others as a person, and perhaps more importantly is not treated by others as a person.”⁸ As the selection of actions that we and only we have becomes limited and vanishes, so does our ability to remain unique. It becomes possible for someone to own the same clothes, have the same educational and recreational experiences at the same times, and to live in a community structured exactly the same as ours. It becomes possible for our own uniqueness to turn from genuine to illusory. By looking at the creation of the unique experience in MMORPGs, we can create tools that allow us to perceive the limits being placed on us in our own world and defend ourselves against the forces seeking to limit our unique experiences.

⁸[Ritzer, 2004] p59-60

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