

Aspects of Identification in Computer Gaming

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This article relates computer gaming to the social psychology of identity, focusing the notion that identity construction has a reflected character not only in virtual reality but also in real life. This gives a tight correspondence between the two, although the screen construction of identity goes on in greater independence of real other persons. Gaming has the trait that it contracts several events at one point in space and time. This provides for two extremes of identification: functional and existential identification, which are tightly coupled in gaming, but also for the element of meaning creation in gaming, where the step from concrete action to mental act is short, as well as for the processes of anticipatory identification that are found in it. This gives a high emotional intensity to it. The analysis is based on a theoretical sketch of stages in the act, building on the work of G. H. Mead.

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This article is about the influence of computer gaming on personal or individual identity, and on motivation for gaming. The conceptual frame of reference is derived from pragmatist social psychology, especially in the version of G. H. Mead's thoughts. Here, we find that identity presupposes consciousness. This, in turn, presupposes action in general and social action in particular. For Mead, this, in effect, is the same as language, or significant symbols, as he coined his concept (Mead 1969/1934, part 1). In order for the infant Andrew to develop a *perception* and

a following *conception* of his own identity, it is presupposed that Andrew is active towards other human beings, and that these respond to his action. If this happens, Andrew can indirectly notice that there is an object – his own body and behaviour – to which the responses of Others are directed. This event is the basis for his identity. It is given to him indirectly by Others' reactions to his behaviour. It is important to notice that Andrew's own actions are not nearly as important for his construction of identity as are the responses of Others.

This means that having a body, and behaving (through the body), is far from sufficient for Andrew's identity construction. It is only when Others react to his behaviour that he can discover himself by taking in Others' reactions to his behaviour. In short: Andrew needs a mirror, or looking glass. But this mirror is highly subjective, and he himself is not aware of the process of reflection and identification attached to it. He is merely spontaneously taking part of the reflections as part of the social process he is involved in.

To use a simple analogy: Andrew can not experience his own identity by turning his eyes into his head, trying to look into his own brain. Nothing is there to be seen, partly because there would probably be an overwhelming pain, but mainly because there is no light for his eyes. The light for his eyes is like the interface that exists between him and the Others. This interface has the function of transferring the Others' responses to Andrew's acts into his experience, so that he can discover his own action at a distance, so to speak. Among all events in the world, your own action is the least attainable; it is impossible to discover because you are always in the middle of it. Thus, you need somebody else to mediate it for you. This conception is fundamental to Meadian social psychology (Mead 1969/1934, part II; Berg 2006a, ch. 3). Since there is insufficient space here to develop this thought, I rather use it as a presupposition.

Personal identity is the result of social action, from the time you spend as a newborn infant until you die from old age. Other people provide you with the capacity to discover your identity, as well as the form and content in which you discover it. Your own main contribution is, apart from your own spontaneous action, the growing capacity to distinguish the different characteristics of it, and subsequently, to come to pre-

fer some of these, while rejecting others. And this capacity is also closely connected to your social life, because it emerges as a result of the history of your own life, where some events are pleasant and some are not, depending on the evaluations of your “significant others”, the persons nearest and most important to you, and on whom you depend the most.

Most of what I have said here is in accordance with general social psychology theories on identity development, self evaluation, self image, and similar processes. But the first and general position I have made is seldom made clear: it is impossible to develop a Self and identity without the Other. That your identity is deeply affected by Others is recognized, but not that it is generated by them.

Computer gaming has a relation to identity that is sometimes very close to this conception. Sherry Turkle's analysis (1995) is a modern classic on this subject, and many researchers follow her. Where does all this lead us, then, when talking about computer gaming and its influences on identity? I have previously tried to trace some components in this story, e.g. by reading the psychoanalyst Turkle from a social psychologist's perspective (Berg 2006b; 2007). I now want to go further in this endeavour, and as starting point, I will use the Meadian analysis of the concept of *act*, and place the act of computer gaming within such a frame.

Stages in the Act and Their Relation to Identification and Computer Games

Mead suggests four stages of any ordinary human act: the *impulse* and *perception* stages, the *manipulative* stage, and finally the *consummating* stage. It is possible to put these in relation to identification and to computer gaming. We can use words like *primitive* and/or *unreflective* identification in the first stages of an act, in which you quickly have to adjust your action to another being in a transient manner; and *elaborated* and/or *existential* identification in the consummating stage.

The first, uncomplicated version of identification, can be illustrated by the act of not treading on your partner's feet when dancing. In so far as you can anticipate the movements of your partner, you can avoid his/her feet, and this is a primitive way of identifying yourself with your partner. Your correct anticipation of his/her movements *is* in fact a way of identification to the extent that you perform implicitly his/her move-

ments before you perform your own. This identification is primitive, unreflective and functional, in the sense that you implicitly perform the functions that your partner performs explicitly. It is also unreflective in the sense that you do not ponder consciously on whether you want to perform the act implicitly or not; you just do it without thinking, in much the same way as you put one foot before the other when walking. Your conscious thought does not keep pace with your spontaneous action. It is only afterwards, when the dance is over, that you and your partner can consider whether your dance was correct or not. Or you can make this observation if you make a false step and tread on your partner's feet, in which case there is a second of intensive reflective thought activity.

This kind of action is highly relevant to consider in computer gaming. I remind the reader of the game *Counter-Strike* (CS) (1999), in order to demonstrate a perfect version of this identification process in gaming. CS is a game of the "shoot-first" sort. Your concentration is restricted to observing every possibility to shoot first – in order not to be shot first. Most of the necessary minute actions needed to obtain this objective are pre- or subconscious. There is no time to consciously reflect upon which action to take, as there are sometimes several small acts to perform during just one single second.

Among the many possible terms for adequately describing this sort of identification I choose *functional*, because it points to the simplicity, or automatic machine-like system, of the action, and also to the concrete character of action.

The elaborated version of identification can also be called *reflective*, *advanced*, and/or *existential* identification. This can be illustrated by most of the game types that Turkle discusses and has performed interviews about. They are called online games, often labelled with the technical term *MMORPG's* (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games). We can also describe this identification as *mediated*, from more primitive stages to more developed ones; for example, from the impulse stage to the consummated stage. It is mediated because it is made to pass from the impulsive stage, through the long and complicated stages where the objects are manipulated, to the consummating stage where you can con-

sider and evaluate your play as for example good or bad, thrilling or boring.

The concept of manipulation is used by Mead to indicate the various aspects of handling the object. A simple example would perhaps be that before you can consume your sandwich, you have to prepare it (manipulate it), and after you have eaten it, you can evaluate it in aesthetic terms (consummating stage). The concept of consummation should not be equalized to consumption, but rather to fulfilment. The finest pleasure of the sandwich, or the glass of good wine, does not appear when you crunch the last bit or sip the last drops, but a second afterwards, when it is already in the stomach. The intensity of the bouquet peaks after taking the drink in your mouth, perhaps when it is already swallowed.

An interview I performed with an adult gamer of *CS*, Brian, illustrates this neatly. Brian tells me that much goes on during the long manipulative stage; in this case, the handling of an imaginary gun. Although not using the concept of manipulation, he is able to talk about the session in terms of the second-for-second actions that take place, and to consider the whole game as one long phase of manipulation. Afterwards, there is a regular chatting on the screen with your partner, settling the evaluations of the play. This is the consummating stage of the game.

It is essential that this notion of stages of the act can be applied to very short sequences, for example one single shot in *CS*, or to the whole game, from agreeing with your playmates that you are going to have an hour of gaming, to evaluating the session and agreeing on when and where to meet the next time. This, again, corresponds to dancing: you can regard one single step as a whole act, and you can find a bad consummatory phase if you tread on your partner's toes, or you can regard the whole dance as one act and enjoy its character explicitly with your partner afterwards, conversing as you leave the floor. This difference between the second-to-second action, and the whole session as one single act, is often of major importance in gaming. We will consider this in the last sections of the article.

Of particular interest from the interview with Brian is his capacity to make short chatting comments on the game even when it is going on. The two gamers keep a dialogic diary while the session runs. This is possible in spite of the fact that the game is dependent on fast speed. Long

and continuous training probably promotes this capacity to do one thing while commenting on it verbally at the same time. The same can happen while driving a car, for example. It is a version of what is called simultaneous capacity. I had a fine opportunity to observe this during Brian's session with his friend. Expressed in my terms: Brian has developed the capacity to be intensely engaged in the manipulation phase of the act, which goes on at very high speed, while, at the same time, also standing as an observer outside the playing board. He can be two persons at once – but definitely not connoting schizophrenia. On the contrary, he has an extremely good control over the two phases of himself, something which the schizophrenic has not. This is sometimes used as a definition of sociality in Mead's texts; the capacity to be two individuals at the same time or to be at two points in reality at once.

If we carry this back to the theory of stages in the act, we then make the important observation that an individual can be present in different stages of the act at the same time. While manipulating during the act, you can simultaneously evaluate it, and perhaps you can remember which impulses you had before the act, that drove you to indulge in it. This is the essence of reflection: the capacity to keep an act real and living as it passes on into the future. This is an aspect of the theory that should be worked out in detail. The theory of stages in the act indicates an important aspect of human intelligence: the capacity to keep different parts of an act present and living instead of “dropping them dead” one after another.

Expressed in Mead's own words, which were never developed to their full potential: sociality is the capacity to be at two places or to be two persons or to give two responses *at the same time* (Mead 1981/1964). Expressed differently: to anticipate what the other person will do, and when he/she will do it, is sociality in its elementary form. This is essential in a game like CS. Admittedly, it is essential in chess as well, but there is a particular feature that is striking and evident in CS: the speed at which this must be done.

This, however, is not enough. Brian is capable of handling at least three aspects of sociality at the same time. He is anticipating his partner's action every second during the game, and he adjusts his own action correspondingly. Furthermore, his thought is ahead, and he can evaluate the

game while it is still going on. And even further, he carries on a conversation with his partner, explicitly carrying through – and discussing – this evaluation.

We have now illustrated both functional and existential identification, although the latter in an elementary version, in one seemingly simple example, the game *Counter-Strike*, played by an experienced gamer. In conclusion: the functional sort of anticipation can be very fast. It presupposes only a primitive or elementary identification with, for example, bodily movements of the Other. This is found even on lower levels of psychic development than the human, such as the dog fight, one of Mead's favourite examples for illustrating what he calls a "conversation with gestures". It is highly probable that the dog fight includes learned responses of the sort Mead indicated, but also instinctive behaviour that can work without any reflective psychic activity, like the patellar and corneal reflexes in humans (stretch reflex of the knee, and blink reflex of the eye). For example, a dog's withdrawing of the lips and showing of the teeth is an instinctive behaviour elicited by certain stimuli. Very little learned behaviour is present here. This behaviour is thus not reserved for the elaborated, reflective, and existential identification defined above when analyzing Brian's conversation with his partner. The existential identification presupposes the functional one. But the former does not automatically result in the latter. And the former does not presuppose an experiential presence of the whole chain of stages in the act, for the actor. The latter, does.

Identity as a Reaction to Reflected Activity

We now must settle an essential relation between identity, act and computer gaming. Seen from our perspective, the following stands out: human action is the stuff that makes up human identity, and building identity is a form of action. It is not made in a vacuum by reflecting on yourself *a priori*, or before, action. If Brian is to find an identity for himself, this is done in the first place by his own action, reflected through his observation of his partner's reaction to it. In this reflective process, Brian begins building his identity by taking up, and integrating, the different responses he receives from the Other.

So you can never find your identity in yourself. You must reflect (on) the Other's reactions to your action in order to settle a personal identity. You can never settle your own action without mediation, because you are always in the middle of it. But when the Other has reacted to your action, you can receive his reaction, and, in turn, react to this, which will then make up the basis for your identity. There are, thus, your own (spontaneous and unmediated) action; the Other's response to it; and your own (reflective and mediated) response to Others' responses.

What is particular about interacting with or through the computer is the way in which the Other's response is structured. There are at least two principal ways for these responses to be created. The first is that the response is structured in a standardized way that does not take Brian's special personality into account. To be a gamer you must master the computer and its software, much as you cannot communicate with English speaking people without knowing the English language. The software of the program gives the answer to Brian when he acts at the computer. Little room is left here for personally formed action. The second special characteristic for reaction to action is that the computer with its hardware and software is not only an "actor" in itself (by the software program), but also the medium through which Brian interacts with his friends and partners. Here, there is room for personal reaction. This is what happens in elementary form in CS, and, in a much more sophisticated manner, in online role games.

What happens on the screen is no trifle. Solid identity construction is taking place, the more solid as Brian is increasingly emotionally engaged in the game, working both in relation to the hardware and software and to the online friends. Only by understanding the issue in these psychological terms can we understand some of the more difficult reactions reported in the field. To take one example (reported in the Swedish national television news program *Rapport* in the autumn of 2006): a teenage boy spends too much time with the computer. His mother gives him an ultimatum. The boy reacts by taking his computer with him and moving to a friend in order to keep spending at least 10-12 hours a day by the screen. This presents a major problem for the family, and it considerably constrains both the boy and the mother, affecting the entire life process in a bad way for both. This would probably not have happened if

the computer game was just a plain entertainment for the boy (according to the mother, no other problems between the two were prevalent). But computer games are not plain entertainment. Computer gaming is heavy stuff.

In a nutshell: the boy gets an identity for himself reinforced, to which he reacts positively. Or, to express this in a way standardized by Turkle and others: what he does not accomplish easily in RR (real reality) he does in VR (virtual reality). He is playing the online MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (WoW 2005), and the special trait appearing here is that he is entitled to cultivate *any identity he wants* without the Other mastering him, other than competing with him on the screen concerning the objectives that are immanent to that screen and the rules implemented by the game developer. There is no old mother reminding him of his RR identity, of which he is not fond.

In conclusion: on the screen, identity construction can go on swiftly and seemingly unquestioned. You build yourself into any Gestalt and Narrative that you want. Nobody questions your inclinations. There are no obstacles, other than the standardized basic rules in the software. You get your reinforcement already by the Others accepting you, in the very act of reacting to your actions on the screen.

Compare this to the jazz musician playing with his partners. He also builds his identity (as a musician). He gives an improvisation on the 12 bars theme. His success is dependent not only on his handicraft skill and his obeying the basic rules of jazz improvisation, but to a high degree on the preceding performance by himself and his partners; the attention he gets from them during his solo performance; their indications of how he should perform; the reactions of the audience, and on many other stimuli, which he must handle in the process. There are two striking differences between these two situations:

1. The musician is much more bound by many *concrete* interactions and rules. These have immediate validity and they must not be broken in the process.
2. These interactions go on in a *direct* way for the musician. You meet your partners directly here and now, and you exercise eye and ear contact with them in order to come through.

In effect, the success of the performance is directly dependent on these concrete interdependencies.

Gender Identification Tendencies in Computer Gaming

The two basic interaction conditions mentioned above prevail to a much lower degree on the screen. I suggest that this fact contributes significantly to the attraction that computer gaming exerts over many young persons. It is evident from statistics on computer gaming that this attraction is especially forceful on boys. My interpretation in terms of identity building, coupled to this gender difference observed in computer gaming, gets evident support from the common observation that boys are more inclined to individualistic accomplishments and instrumental skills than girls are (e.g. Chodorow 1978). My point is that there is a perception of realization and directness of what is played out on the screen, but that both are illusory. It is easier to change the conditions that an individual wants to see as dominating on the screen, than to have them dominate instantaneously in the jazz ensemble playing together. It is easier to “deceive” both Other and yourself on the screen, and you can feel more powerful than a listener in the jazz audience can, because you can “fake” both realization and directness. You can not fake when playing music with friends.

Chodorow is American, and her classic thesis, *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), is 30 years old. She has received criticism from feminists and culture analysts. Some of her deeper psychoanalytical interpretations of the different identification processes that boys and girls go through do, however, make a point which is at times superficially overlooked, possibly also for gender political reasons. Without any possibility to go deeper into her theory here, I refer to a statement in her thesis that claims that boys' identification processes – for cultural, social, and historical reasons – drive them to a more abstract, instrumental and individualistic way of identification, while girls go the opposite way: they realize, and consequently identify, themselves as persons living in and through concrete and emotional relations to other people (rather than to things).

The point, then, following Chodorov, is that boys' tendencies towards independent identity building are more reinforced by computer gaming compared to the identity building of a more female character, which to a greater extent would rely on concrete relations. An interpretation in terms of Chodorow's theory thus makes the overwhelming male dominance in computer gaming more comprehensible; computer gaming provides possibilities to maintain the traditional masculine identification characteristics.

I do not claim Chodorow's theories to be overall appropriate in Sweden 2008, but it is evident that boys are much more engaged in computer gaming than girls are. This harmonizes with my interpretation given here, and the concepts provided above (abstract, instrumental and individualistic identification) are adequate to understand these facts. They apply to gender identification differences as well as to computer gaming, in contrast to concrete games with persons that are not mediated through a computer. It is also interesting to see that more and more girls engage in computer gaming at the same time as girls' and boys' traditional gender roles are increasingly becoming blurred.

There is also another point to be gained here: my identification concepts include the terms *Gestalt* and *Narrative* (story telling). The former highlights the necessity to perceive something on the basis of which you can construct yourself. You must be good or bad, young or old, beautiful or ugly. This concerns basic evaluative and emotional identity Gestalts. Shoot-your-enemy games like *CS* are mostly of the Gestalt sort. The characteristics here are strong/weak, fast/slow, accurate/inaccurate at shooting, etc. Boys should be more prone to choose simple Gestalts (e.g. of masculinity). Girls should tend to play more in a way of Narrative. This is in accordance with most findings in current statistical on-line game research, where we find, e.g., that girls go into online role games to a higher degree than they go into shoot-first-games like *CS* (cf. Linderöth 2004; 2007). This was also found in doll playing in a pilot study by Berg & Nelson (2006). These findings establish a hypothesis: girls are more attracted to online narrative identity play than boys, who like Gestalt gaming such as *CS* better. This is also in deep accordance with Chodorow's theory that girls identify with Gestalts that live by their communicative relations to other people, while boys take on a more instru-

mentalist role (e.g. shooting) towards other people. The Berg & Nelson study corroborates this as far as preschool children are concerned. In the study, the children were offered the freedom to choose toy Gestalts, and to perform play with these. The boys spent their time shooting (not least each other) with their He-man Gestalts, while the girls tended to invent varying and sweet stories of walking to school, shopping in town, etc.

Reflective Capacity and Functional Versus Existential Identification

The preceding section was mainly devoted to the possibility of individual and gender choice and decision, and to the fluency and rapidity with which this process can work. The concepts of *Gestalt* and *Narrative* were also introduced. Now let us examine the argument deeper by going back to the theory of the chain of the act, or stages in the act, as Mead called it. I introduced the thought that reflection is constituted by looking back on the preceding stages, when you come to the consummating stage. We can express this with more stringency: the consummating stage is partly constituted by looking back, by evaluating the chain of the act. This is to say that reflective capacity is what makes consummation possible.

Reflection, thus, is possible only when you have gone from the early stages of an act to the later ones. It is constituted or established by taking the whole act into account and evaluating it. This taking into account is the essence of reflection, and so reflection can be operationally defined as the capacity to grasp the whole act, or most of it, in one single mental representation. It is essential that going through the stages is a presupposition for reflection. The act comes first, thought (about the act) later.

Again, it seems that computer gaming is an excellent example of how reflection comes about and can work. This is exactly what Brian is doing when he is commenting the play with his partner while it is going on, and still more after the session when they both chat on the screen with each other. They are considering the game and its conditions and evaluating it, taking the whole into account, and in the process, giving each other compliments or criticism. This process is facilitated, and probably even enhanced, by some characteristics residing in the computer game as medium: everything is served in intimate and direct contact with each other, and all disturbing elements of both social and technical character

are chased away. If the gamers are competent, everything works extremely smooth. It is a dense parcel, where every trait has an immediate relation to the next trait. This characteristic will be treated in more depth below.

Here, we find a further development of identification that carries it into psychic processes beyond mere physical anticipation of the Other's action. When Brian is complimenting his partner he says: if I were you, I would be proud of my speed (or whatever capacity the partner has displayed). Brian is putting himself in the position of the partner, and the partner in the position of himself. They are taking each others places in Brian's mind, while he is commenting on the game. This is mature role-taking, in the way that Mead used the term.

This example illustrates both primitive and elaborated identification. Playing the game provides, in one session, for hundreds or thousands of instances of fast, functional, anticipatory identification, and the chatting over the session gives the elaborated existential identification where there is ample mental space for empathizing activity concerning the feelings and impressions of the game.

Emotional Intensity in Gaming and Stages in the Act

Now we can identify special instances in the chain of the act, where the emotional reactions take on different characteristics. Computer games provide exceptionally good opportunities for observing these processes. It is easy to see that the impulsively strong aspects of emotional experience are “hot” in games like *CS*. Impulsivity almost becomes inner psychic compulsion. The player gets carried away by his own impulses because the game demands fast action. All attention is occupied by the game, and obvious signals of spontaneous emotional excitement are common. This is easy to observe among young players; it is apparent already with such a simple game as *Super Mario Bros.* (1985). This is a special case of the childish intensity in social role playing. But the same process is reported even from older players: Brian, an intellectual young adult, tells us about the impulsive and strong emotional character of his “addiction”, of which he is well aware.

Brian thereby shows that he has a reflective capacity to observe his own behaviour in objective and critical terms in an existential identifi-

cation process from himself as intellectual to himself as a game “addict”. He is creating a clear path from the player's first step in the stage of impulse, to the intellectual evaluator after the game. And he exerts a meta-reflective activity on top of it. So he illustrates an essential aspect of identification processes in play and game activities. He rapidly passes from the childish intensive emotional attitude to the objective observer, evaluating his own engagement in the game.

As identification processes, these are sophisticated and difficult to analyze. I suggest that computer games constitute a virginal field for studying them. Consider again the example of Brian and the CS session, and apply to his activity the theory of stages in the act. In a very short time span you proceed from stages of impulse and perception over the many manipulating steps to the consummating stage with its special confirmatory social acts of recognition and identification.

The early stages of the act are spontaneous. This carries with it the consequence that they are exposed to emotional impulsivity to a higher degree than the later stages; spontaneous behaviour is emotional behaviour. Brian tells me about this phenomenon concerning CS where the whole thing is about following the impulses to shoot fast enough. Reflection comes later. Other young adults also tell me that you easily let yourself be carried away emotionally by the rapidity and concentration demanded by these games, resulting in a high level of excitement.

Computer Gaming as “Contracting” the Act

The process discussed above is in this way very similar to the role play process observed among small children, which Mead saw as essential in their growing into human beings, with the particular feature of creating an identity and a consciousness. I have analyzed the strong and intensive character that this role play has for children (Berg 2006a/1992; 1999; 2003; 2004; 2007; Berg & Nelson 2006) by referring to its necessity for the creation of an identity, and by regarding the latter as an essential *sine qua non* for every human being.

RR life seldom allows people older than 5 to build identity in this liberal way. But computer gaming legitimizes this miracle, not only for 10 year old boys or teenagers, but for adults as well. Computer games thus constitute a legitimate arena for continuing the building of VR identities

as the young child does. And the major point to put in the limelight is that, whereas RR identity building is a tiresome and prolonged process that goes on in very different surroundings and fragmented conditions, the VR identity building goes on in a strictly defined and confined arena where the whole process is accomplished in a short and undisturbed passage of time, under easily systematized conditions, and with very little resistance. It is done with high compression and condensation – conditions like those of a plant in a green house.

Returning again to the theory of the act, we can express the phenomenon in this way: whether one regards the identity building as a prolonged and complicated chain of events as in *WoW* (*World of Warcraft*), or as the very short event happening in a short segment of a *CS* game, the stages in the act can be held together in a rather systematic fashion. They can, so to speak, be handled by the player so that they are more or less visible for him/her during the game. There is a possibility for calculus and bargaining of the identity with Self, as in *CS* individually, playing with just the software program, or with Others, as in complicated *WoW* sessions.

Returning to the computer game, this means that it has a special condition to offer the gamer. Like other games, this situation is highly structured. It is possible to anticipate most of the events in the game, while the thrill is the unknown factor of “who will win” – other circumstances are well known. This is possibly one of the main reasons that gaming is a thrilling activity that fascinates so many people. It is as in roulette: you know all the facts save the one that determines if you will find yourself ruined or rich. But in computer gaming (without money), the profit is not primarily economic, but a profit of identity. The drive for consciousness is to know the whole situation. In games, you can not know the main event before it is over. This constitutes the thrill.

You can define consciousness as emanating from the stages in the act. Consciousness is the capacity to keep together the stages in your imagination, while the act is carried out. It is like being able to take any given instance in a film and make a photo of it, but also to know where in the complete film each single photo belongs. Or as Mead once defined the concept: consciousness is no more complicated than to be able to anticipate your own action (Mead 1969/1934).

The tension between known and unknown factors provides for much of the thrill of the game. While permeable, open, visible, and in most respects highly predictable, this characteristic makes prediction and anticipation impossible, due to one single factor: chance and/or the uncertainty of who is the most skilled player.

It seems that computer games, especially the CS kind, maximize this sort of conditions, and presents them in a clean and logic sequence (an online identity game such as *WoW* has additional conditions which must be analyzed in their own rights).

We can now summarize parts of the discussion in the last three sections to arrive at an understanding of the strong attraction that gaming can exert: gaming allows you to draw together and put in one single framework the possibility of creating an identity as a whole for yourself. You can do it freely, because other people do not really interfere with your gaming process the way they do in RR. You can do it individually and not depend on an actual RR person. There are, so to speak, curtains hanging between you and the Other, so that you can play hide-and-seek with him/her. You are not left bare with your trivial acts, but can act the glamorous person you created in your character. And you can, finally and essentially, accomplish this totality within a particular area or arena of life marked with sharp and legitimate boundaries that the RR life must not break (Huizinga 1955). The illusions are not only legitimate here, they are the rule which lends the process a character of reality, although virtual.

Computer Gaming and Meaning Creation

To pinpoint these questions, I will go to my interpretation of Mead's theory of meaning. This will also complement Linderöth's (2004, esp. ch. 3) versatile and profound analysis of meaning in relation to computer gaming. Meaning for Mead is a result of interaction including the Other, reacting to the action of the individual. When the individual takes up and recognizes his own act, perceived in the reaction that Other gives to this former act of the individual, the phenomenon we call *meaning* occurs. We can express this in the following fashion: Other's response to my action establishes a distance between this action and myself, and the result is that I can take it up and observe it as a sort of autonomous enti-

ty. I can distance myself from my action, when Other reacts to it, and I perceive his reaction.

We can not go to the core of this theory here, but consider for a moment a simple example: I am walking on the pavement, thinking of a problem at my job. There is a brick in my way. I stumble and fall. My consciousness of the situation is not at hand before I can see the brick and conclude a primitive theory of the brick intervening with my automatic walking, etc. The brick performs the function of an Other in this situation, forcing me to observe what I was doing unconsciously, i.e. putting one foot before the other in what we call walking. Thus, the various concrete elements of meaning are present in the situation (Mead 1969/1934, ch. 11), whereas the consciousness of meaning automatically is not, but is brought about by the brick. Consciousness of meaning is exclusively tied to the fact that the action causes a response in the Real Other that is similar to the response it causes in myself (Mead 1969/1934, ch. 11 and part II); Other's response to my act lends it the (conscious) meaning it has. This meaning constitutes my consciousness of the situation. Thus, we can say that my capacity to learn creatively and consciously to avoid bricks is dependent on the Other's taking part of my accident with the first brick. This learning is something else than the learning in Skinner's rats and pigeons.

Now, there are two sorts of Other in the computer. When I play the game with one or more Real Others, they are there as in the Meadian scene just mentioned, responding to my actions on the screen but from a distance, from "behind" the screen. But there is also a Virtual Other, determining much of the meaning in a visible way more vividly than is possible with mere spoken language between me and my partners. Thus, my communication is both with the Real Others and with the Virtual Other of the software.

Just imagine, as a test, what would result if there were no logic in the responses that the computer program makes. If all the program's responses were haphazard, even to the extent that we could not predict if there will be a response or not: no person would in the long run be able to consider this situation as *computer gaming* within any reasonable limits of the concept.

There is an easy test of this hypothesis of communicating with two different “persons”. We never talk about ordinary language in personalizing terms. But we do so in the case of the computer and its program, because the interactive windows in the program are visible and readable for us as a sort of communicating partner. We say that the computer “wants” us to do something, or that it “forbids”, “refuses”, etc.

Turkle (1995) provides many vivid interview examples of this personalizing function. Johansson (1996; 2000) has numerous examples of the charming way preschool children exhibit such spontaneity. Children's way of perceiving computer games is a brilliant and general illustration of the basic psychic function I want to highlight: playing online games like *WoW* (or easier versions with the same logic, even the simple *Mario* game), they identify verbally with the figures on the screen. They naturally refer to the partner's avatar as “you” and to their own as “I”. There are already numerous illustrations of this in the growing literature on children and computer games (Linderoth 2007). I have also seen the spontaneous bodily movements of children when they watch the figures on the screen. When the partner moves towards Ego on the screen, Ego may both scream “Don't hit me!” and physically move his/her own body, as if the hitting would take place immediately. In this way, Other's action towards Ego on the screen has the correspondingly awakening functions as the brick that I stumble on when walking.

Different versions of developmental psychology have long since observed that conscious cognitive activity, e.g. problem solving, is always preceded by some sort of blocking or hindrance. The brick interrupts my walking. Other blocks my way on the screen. S/he informs me verbally (as in preschool children's co-play on the same screen, or as in *Mario*), or in the chat (like Brian and his partner), of something going on, with the result that I become conscious of the situation and of what its scenario means to me. All these instances are examples of the basic Meadian thesis of meaning: the Other's response to my act grants it the meaning it has to me.

I suggest, in accordance with the preceding section, that a significant part of the fascination in computer gaming resides in the more or less mysterious fact that the computer looks like a machine, but reacts to your action as if it were, or as if it contains, a living person. And in fact it

does, although extremely indirectly, even if you only play with a Virtual Other. In this way, the computer is a prime example of what the Swedish social psychologist Johan Asplund (1987) calls *social responsiveness* (Swedish: *social responsivitet*). His own, rather primitive example, is this one: when flying a kite, the varying tension in the line that I hold in my hand is experienced as a response. It is, adopting my current terminology, as if there were a Virtual Other up there in the kite riding the wind, an Other answering me and my wishes down there on earth. The situation corresponds neatly to the children playing on the screen with their figures. The difference is only that the response on the screen originates from a Real Other, although it seems to emanate from the avatar itself.

To proceed with this argument, Asplund's theory builds up an ambitious Meadian logic in the concept: social responsiveness is not only emotionally necessary to people. It is what makes human life human. Or, with Mead again: man becomes involved as an infant in meaning construction. The way that this construction unconsciously comes into being – or is born – is that the human individual brings forth responses in the Other that are similar to your own responses to yourself.

Taken together, this argument puts forward the thesis that the computer games invite you into a world where you have two similar, but different, playmates: the Real Other, and the Virtual Other, and that an intricate construction of meaning systems takes place between these three partners. In the games mentioned, a central object for this meaning construction is the Gestalt or the Capacities of my Self, which is the living dynamic aspect of my identity.

One of the most intricate systems of meaning ever constructed by human beings is the personal identity. The construction of himself as a constructor of meanings in general, and of meanings concerning his own Self in particular, is the very core of every human individual's psychic endeavour in life. It is the Self as a centre of a meaningful world that is the basic meaning system. The Self is a spider in its ever expanding web.

The computer has brought new conditions for this main affair of human life that meaning construction constitutes. The main novelty might be described as the individual illusory capacity to construct new meanings indefinitely. There really is an illusion here: I can think of myself as the only constructor of meanings and my own identity, but behind this

there lurks – at a distance – both Real Others, as in *WoW*, and always and inevitably a Virtual Other, whom I do not see, and who is much more permissive to me than any Real Other is. So I can feel as unbound as Prometheus to build my identity in the way I choose. We can return to the argument, presented in the introduction, that identity always builds on illusions in the sense that it is not the real world or the real Self that is involved, but my perception of the Other's responses to my action. The Virtual Other in the computer is a very liberal and permissive tutor for me, building my identity. He is also much more thrilling. These are enough reasons for young boys to move away from home, when their mothers want them to face up to the grim demands of RR.

With the computer, I can manipulate the responses according to my will, which I can not do so easily with Real Others. With the computer, I can abstract what is in reality concrete, i.e., the Other, and through this, the impression of Virtual Reality is created. It rests on foundations that are as concrete and real as Real Reality, but the computer and its software translates concrete to abstract, and this grants an illusory real character to much of what is done in front of the screen. The objection that this illusory character is already there, in the written word for example (instead of the directly spoken), is not valid. Why? Because the computer introduces two types of interaction that are not present when reading a text. Firstly, there is a software that constantly anticipates what you are going to do. Secondly, most computer gaming today involves an RR partner, be it on the same screen, the other screen beside you, or at the other end of the line, in Korea, Sweden or the USA.

Computer Gaming and Abstract Sociality

What happens with sociality and its capacity for creation of meaning in these conditions? As the computer games inevitably introduce a sort of abstraction in life, some important things that have to do with proceeding from concrete to abstract sociality should be important to investigate here. Asplund (1987) began to delineate this procession and its possible consequences, but did not include the computer in his reflections. It is time to do so. The concept of abstract identification quickly introduces itself. No concrete person from RR is there to mediate my way of introducing myself in the *WoW* game. It can only be done through the com-

puter in order to be done “correctly”. In other words, it can only be done abstractly.

Asplund has a theory that abstract sociality is a modern way of structuring man's social life in such a way that the everyday life endeavour decreasingly has to do with surviving physically in a group. Instead it increasingly has to do with, e.g., presenting even larger groups of people to each other in anonymous masses that do not have an “organic” relation to each other. This is interpreted in a pessimistic way by Asplund, where abstract sociality is not a condition of mental and social wealth, but of poverty.

It is worth studying how these processes can be regarded in computer gaming, an activity which can probably be said, in a technical sense, to draw abstract sociality to its extremes. It is tempting to go further: to look at the chat forums where people are incognito but still discuss quite intimate topics with other and unknown people, and with no obligations whatsoever of a concrete character. The possibilities that purely abstract sociality introduces are clearly perceptible in this. Is it possible to evaluate this in both positive and negative ways?

There is no *a priori* reason to condemn computer gaming on the basis of an “abstract socialization” argument. Instead, there seems to be a lot of evidence of concrete contact making through the computer, through both its gaming and chatting functions. And this seems to be valid through a wide array of questions. Let us thus in conclusion remember the positive picture of autistic children who find, in the predictably rational pattern of responses from the Virtual Other, a steady platform for departing into a bewildering social world. This abstract sociality is, in effect, a way of preparing and training them for a more fruitful and concretely socializing way of life.

I suggest that a versatile study of abstract sociality and computer gaming should have a high priority.

Anticipatory Identification and Computer Gaming

The process of evoking in Other the same response as you evoke in yourself, to which Mead attributes crucial importance, includes the anticipation of the Other's act. This is performed in many ways, from very elementary behaviour of subconscious character, to elaborate conscious re-

flective action. The most elementary sort is at hand already in nerve reflexes and primitive preconscious behaviour: when walking and stumbling, I anticipate the behaviour of an organism protecting itself with arms or in other ways. In, e.g., CS, this elementary functioning is present as I react to Other's shots by hiding faster than I can consciously think. The question of whether this is reflex behaviour or a result of earlier learning is not important here, the point is that it is preconscious already by virtue of its speed. I have no time to "think it over", I am just "programmed" to hide without thinking of it. The program is set in advance, and my body obeys.

The key point here is my knowledge that it is a game, and that the only way to win the game is to be a faster hider and/or shooter than my partner is. I thus identify with the imagined person that has this virtue to a high degree. I try to cultivate a property, which, although present in me, can be trained into a better condition. I also identify with my partner in his ambition to be a faster shooter than I am.

Only by identifying with my partner can I cultivate the skill of *his* counterpart, i.e., myself. I must know what he wants to do – in order to prevent him from doing it. Two capacities are there in the same second: a well-known and reflected knowledge of the rules of the game, and a preconscious capacity to physically react so fast that your consciousness does not keep pace with your physical action. These are two opposites that stand out for each other. I put forward the hypothesis that the *combination of these two opposites* is a main reason for the fascination that CS evokes in many people. This trait is well known before the time of computers and CS. It is already there in paper card games, where you must react to the colour of a newly produced card faster than your partner does in order to gain. But the computer makes this indefinitely more sophisticated than the old techniques. Firstly, the degree of refinement in the learned and reflected body of knowledge and rules is much larger; and secondly, you can decide for yourself on many of the conditions of the game, e.g. by constructing your character, or by choosing your weapon or killing technique.

The two opposites of spontaneity *and* thoroughly reflected action exist at the same spot, simultaneously, and *in the same act*. They result in

anticipatory identification that flourishes every second. This trait is a major reason for the attractiveness of computer games.

A final note on the character of this identification: it constitutes what I have called *functional identification*, i.e., performing similar actions as the partner does, implicitly and/or explicitly. This is not to be confused with *existential identification*, which provides a more profound experience of being the Other, or of taking in the Other's way of life, or of empathizing with him/her. Obviously, the functional version is more primitive and less reflective than the existential one. The former protrudes to the neurological basis of the organism, to the level I mentioned above of automatically reacting when falling. The latter has many and complicated super structures based on the former, but it also transcends it, as the element of developed sociality is a precondition of the existential roletaking found in many versions of *WoW* and other online games. This means that existential identification is not primarily a more developed or sophisticated form than the functional one. Rather, it introduces new elements into the process, and thus we have a qualitative, not a primarily quantitative, difference between the two forms. But both are demanded in the computer games, and my hypothesis is, again, that the coexistence of different *and* similar demands on identification adds remarkably to the thrill of them.

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