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23 Players and Their Characters in Role-Playing Games

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One of the more complex elements of role-playing studies is understanding the relationship between players and their characters. Indeed, the role-playing experience is unique in that the relationship between the player and character often varies depending on the game, and also due to the expectation that a person is performing a type of “alternate self” during their game. The performative aspects of games may be highly limited and constrained, such as in the case of many multi-player online role-playing games (MORPGs), or much more free and unrestrained, such as with some tabletop role-playing games (TRPG) and live-action role-playing (LARP) experiences. The degree to which players relate to and embody the thoughts, feelings, and actions of their characters depends strongly on the play culture of the group, not just the format or genre of a game. However, players always see themselves as distinct from their character in some way, even when playing intense and highly emotional games **(see also Chapters 13 and 24)**.

This chapter explores topics pertaining to the relationship between players and their characters. These topics include the psychological, such as identity and personality transformation, to sociological concerns, such as representations of gender, race, and sexuality. In some cases, sociological and psychological concerns overlap, such as when players develop parasocial relationships with their characters (Banks and Bowman 2014a).

In this chapter, the term *character* refers to the portrayal of a consistent persona in a fictional world of a role-playing game. The term *avatar*, commonly used in videogames (including computer role-playing games (CRPGs) and MORPGs) to refer to virtual representations of the player, will be used similarly to character. For instance, Jaime Banks uses Gregory Little’s definition of an avatar, describing it as “a delegate, a tool or instrument allowing an agency to transmit signification to a parallel world” (Little 1999) and also “an interactive, social representation of a user” (Meadows 2008). Avatar can refer to a variety of virtual representations, including: a textual name, customized font, an instant messaging icon, forum avatars, the navigational visualization of a user within a digital system, or customizable 3D embodiments (Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold 2012). The term *player* will be used to describe the person who is inhabiting the character or avatar as part of their play of a role-playing game, whether it is played in the real world, digitally, or in a hybrid format.

For the purposes of this chapter, distinguishing between avatar and character as distinct entities is not that important. For example, tabletop games may feature miniature figurines that represent the character for use in battles or dungeon crawls. Role-players also may visually render their characters through works of art or photos of celebrities that look like their alteregos in the game. Costuming in a larp is a form of avatar creation, in the same way that players often customize the clothing and appearance of their characters in MORPGs (Yee 2006). However, in tabletop, freeform, and larp, a visual representation separate from the player is not always necessary for character enactment.

That being said, the different forms of RPGs each have particular affordances when it comes to players and their characters. For example, a player may feel more comfortable portraying their character as a gender different from their own in an online environment, a common occurrence in MORPGs (Yee, Ducheneaut, Yao, and Nelson 2011), whereas such *crossplay* may become more difficult in a fully-immersive larp. While crossplay certainly exists in tabletop and larp games, “passing” as a different gender physically is usually far easier through a digital interface that visually portrays the character. Additionally, standards vary in play communities in terms of expectations of *immersion into character* (see Chapter 22). Role-playing in MORPGs is limited to a small subset of players (Williams, Kennedy, and Moore 2011), whereas intensive character immersion is the norm in Nordic larp (Stenros and Montola 2010).

***Crossplay is the act of playing a character whose gender is different from one’s own.***

Callout 23.1: Crossplay

In this regard, some concepts emerging from the literature are more relevant in the study of certain forms of RPGs than others, although some phenomenological aspects are universal, such as the perception of the character as different from the player due to its status as existing in a fictional game world. The term “fictional” here does not imply that character experiences are somehow less important or “real-feeling” than mundane ones. Rather, the events that transpire within the game are not considered to occur in mundane reality. Thus, a player whose character casts a fireball spell knows the act takes place in fiction, even if that experience was profoundly affecting for the player in question. Despite this tendency to keep separate the “real world” from the fiction, especially in terms of identity, scholars such as Waggoner have found that characters in MORPGS are often “just as real” to users as their non-virtual identities (Waggoner 2009). Thus, this chapter will refer to the person’s everyday self as their *primary identity* and the “real world” as the *mundane* for clarification purposes.

# The Psychology of Players and their Characters

The process of creating a character can range dramatically from game to game. For example, character creation activities could include the selection of the physical appearance of an avatar in a video game (Yee 2006), describing and attributing skills or strengths to one’s character in a tabletop game according to a predefined system (Jara 2013; Torner 2016), or writing several page backstories for a larp character. Other character creation activities include: conducting research on personality factors, genre, or time periods; selection of costuming, whether virtual or physical; and establishing relationships with other characters, whether played by people, computer interfaces, or invented by the player in question (Bowman 2010).

Players of *Dungeons & Dragons*, for instance, may use a character record sheet that considers the character’s quantified attributes including wisdom, dexterity, strength and charisma; languages spoken; special skills; and equipment carried. A *Call of Cthulhu* character sheet may include descriptions of family and friend relationships, special heirlooms, and/or phobias, while a *Night Witches* sheet may allow for fewer room for creativity on the part of the player by reducing the options available. Here check boxes may be used to select if the character is a “Leader” or “Dreamer”. In some cases, designers provide completely pre-written character backgrounds for the players, which the participants must interpret with some degree of fidelity to authorial intention, as is the case with New England Interactive Literature larps (Budin 2015) and many Nordic larps (Stenros and Montola 2010). Thus, players have varying levels of investment and control with regard to fleshing out the details of their characters.

However, a higher degree of investment does not necessarily correlate with greater feelings of immersion into character (Pohjola 2004), attachment (Banks and Bowman, 2014a), or role-play (Williams, Kennedy, and Moore 2011). Each player engages with their character in unique ways at different points during the play period according to their motivations and modes of immersion **(see Chapters 13 and 22)**. Similarly, some characters may evolve over time in terms of the depth of character development in a set of stages: character creation, further development through planning, elaboration through interaction with others, and actualization/realization as an independent entity (Bowman 2010).

As there is so much variety in terms of the extent to which players create their characters, the subsequent sections will focus on how the player enacts and engages with their character from a psychological perspective. Of particular interest are the degrees to which a player feels distinct from their character, how deeply they experience immersion, in what ways they feel that their character is an independent agent, and how they shape their personal identities as a result of character enactment.

## Multiplicity

In role-playing, participants always experience their characters as distinct in some way. In this regard, the moral panics around players “losing touch with reality” or “getting lost in the character” are considered stigmatizing and unfounded by players, as participants perceive their characters as separate entities interacting in a fictional world through the use of *alibi* (Montola and Holopainen 2012). As Bowman explains, alibi is part of the social contract by which “players accept the premise that any actions in the game are taken by the character, not by the player” (Bowman 2015, para. 4). Alibi allows players to distance themselves from the actions of their characters, even when their personae are quite similar to the participants’ primary identities, e.g. “It wasn’t me killing that orc”; “my character yelled at yours, not me”; or “my character is Prince of the city, but I work at an insurance office.” **(see also Chapter 24)** In drama therapy, this notion is called *aesthetic doubling*, where the participant simultaneously perceives themselves as their character and as their primary identity (Østern and Heikkinen 2001). This process is central to other cousin activities involving characterization, such as novel writing, stage acting, improvisation, etc. (Bowman 2015).

Thus, some theorists assert that the ability to create and enact an identity separate from their own is an essential function of the human mind. Psychologists speak of *dissociation*, where the mind shifts states in various ways, including altering one’s sense of time, space, physicality, memory, and identity (Steinberg and Schnall 2000). Some role-play scholars connect this notion of dissociation to the role-play experience (Lukka 2014), particularly with regard to identity alteration (Bowman 2010; 2015). While dissociation is often associated with trauma or a personality disorder, theorists such as Sherry Turkle (1995) emphasize the multiplicity of self as common to the post-modern experience of engagement with multiple media at once. According to Turkle, each window in our computer screen represents a new presentation of self and an exploration of an alternate aspect of our personality. Thus, role-playing characters are extensions of this inherent multiplicity. Along these lines, Carter, Gibbs, and Arnold (2012) have noted at least four distinct modes of identification in MOPRGs: the perspectives of user, player, avatar, and character. The user refers to the mundane identity, the player refers to the mode of engagement in the game, the avatar refers to the visual representation, and the character refers to all the aspects of the alternate persona. These concepts also align with Goffman’s notions of the presentation of self as a shifting identity in various social spaces (1959) and frames (1974), as explored in **Chapter 12.**

Some theorists take the multiplicity of self a step further by suggesting that exploring these facets is productive to the psychological health of the individual (Burns 2014). The theory of psychosynthesis, originally developed by Roberto Assagioli (2000), maintains that each person holds several alternate identities within them, organized by a main overseeing ego known as the Integrator or Manager. In psychosynthesis, the goal of the therapeutic process is to identify, develop, and guide these multiple selves to greater cooperation, rather than unification. In other words, psychosynthesis celebrates the multiplicity of self as a healthy creative process rather than psychosis.

Bob Rehak (2003) takes this notion a bit further, suggesting that games provide a conscious window into the multiplicity already existing within us. He describes our experience of reality as existing in a constant tension between the illusion of wholeness of consciousness and the multiplicity of self “riddled with unbridgeable gaps” (p. 123). Rehak asserts that, through games, players find a “small square of contemplative space: a laboratory, quiet and orderly by comparison with the [mundane] world, in which we toy with subjectivity, play with being” (p. 123). Thus, some role-play theorists find productive multiplicity a possible avenue for understanding the impulse to enact characters, as well as a mode of exploring aspects and skills that can transfer to the primary identity in mundane reality (Turkle 1995; Bowman 2010).

## [Box Insert 23.1]

## Degree of Separation and Intensity of Immersion

Another fascinating element pertaining to the psychology of characters is the way in which players imagine themselves in relation to their character. For some players, a character is a sort of toy that they manipulate to achieve a goal. For others, the character is just an extension of themselves in a fictional world. Others still view their characters as fully articulated alternate personae, with their own goals and feelings. In some cases, the character even becomes a social other in need of care (Banks and Bowman 2014a; Banks 2015). These concepts are explored further in the sections on identity and parasocial relationships.

For some tabletop and larp theorists, the phenomenology of player experience with regard to their character relates to how much control they cede to the alternate persona in play. Similar to method acting, some participants allow the characters to take the primary role in their consciousness during play, even if they always retain some measure of observation through the process of aesthetic doubling (Bowman 2015). Moyra Turkington (2006) describes four degrees of immersion with relationship to the relative distance between the primary identity and the character: marionette, puppet, mask, and possessing force. The marionette refers to the player having the greatest distance and control over the character, whereas in the possessing force, “the player abandons a personal identity and surrenders to the character object as a goal of play in order to directly experience the full subjective reality of the character.” This final description corresponds strongly with the immersionism ideal in Nordic larp and other RPG communities (Pohjola 2003; Bøckman 2003).

**[Box Insert 23.2 here]**

Finally, these concepts may relate to the intensity of immersion experienced by the player. Brown and Cairns (2004) describe three degrees of immersion from weakest to strongest: engagement, engrossment, and so-called “total” immersion. While the authors speak of immersion in a general sense, these concepts are also of interest to the specific experience of *immersion into character* **(see Chapter 22)**. While total immersion in the sense of the player forgetting completely who they are in favor of their character’s feelings, thoughts, and actions is a myth, some participants do report losing time or feeling “possessed” by the character for intervals (Bowman 2015). Ultimately, participants engage with their characters uniquely with regard to degree of character immersion, so generalizations about play experiences are difficult to make.

# Identity

The relationship between a player’s identity and their character’s is a subject of interest to many scholars. One of the most interesting facets of the role-playing experience is the enactment of a different self – and, moreover -- one that may or may not bear resemblance to the player’s primary identity.

Bowman explains that players enter a game and adopt the “new set of social rules, both implicit and explicit” (Bowman, 2015, para. 4), which comprise the game’s social contract. Once this contract has been agreed upon, players can safely enter the “magic circle” of the game, where players have the chance to explore repressed or otherwise marginalized aspects of their consciousness in a relatively consequence-free space. Players can use this space to enact versions of themselves in alternate sets of circumstances or portray characters quite different from their self-concept. Either way, character enactment may result from a psychological dissociative state called *identity alteration*, in which the primary identity relinquishes partial control over the self to an alternate personality (Bowman 2010, 138-143; Bowman 2015). As noted above, proponents of this theory do not consider this dissociative state pathological, but rather a willful extension of the multiplicity of identity inherent to consciousness.

The following sub-sections will detail the ways in which players describe their characters with reference to their primary identity, based upon the types established by Banks (2015) and Bowman (2010) in their qualitative work on role-playing gamers. While a thorough examination of the nuances of these works is beyond the scope of this discussion, this chapter aims to provide a useful set of categories to help understand player-character experiences. Some of these concepts relate directly to the sensation of immersion into character, whereas others are more descriptive of character traits with reference to the primary identity. While Bowman’s work focuses on the psychological dimensions of these identity relationships, Banks also explores the parasocial dynamics and players’ attachment to their characters as external entities.

## Object, Me, Symbiote, Other

Banks’ (2015) qualitative study of MORPG participants revealed four main relationships between players and characters: *avatar-as-object*, *avatar-as-me*, *avatar-as-symbiote*, and *avatar-as-other.*

Some theorists refer to an avatar as a “tool” (Linderoth 2005), “instrument” (Little 1999), or “bundle of resources” (Castronova 2005), highlighting the mechanical, lifeless quality of a computerized representation: one that the player can maneuver, but has no identity of its own. Banks’ works complicates this understanding of an avatar since she demonstrates that several of her respondents have developed emotional intimacy and a sense of commitment to their characters, experiencing their journeys within the game as shared with the avatar, rather than simply viewed through it. While only true for a small minority of Banks’ participants, this conceptualization is closer to the way many of Bowman’s participants describe their analog role-playing characters, many of whom view these alter egos as complete individuals with minds and wills of their own. The degree to which the visual representation of the avatar as generated by a computer program may or may not provide added distance to the role-playing experience is an area of research that requires further investigation. Ultimately, one’s relationship to their character – whether in virtual or analog space – depends quite a bit on their relative creative agendas and player motivations **(see Chapter 13)**.

## Avatar-as-Object

The avatar-as-object relationship features language that most closely resembles viewing the character as tool-like. Players with this sort of stance focus upon competition and combat practices from a strategic and detached perspective, emphasizing game-defined goals over social interaction or identity exploration (Banks 2015). In their systemic linguistic analysis comparing the metaphoric language employed by scholars with the way MORPG users refer to their characters, Banks and Bowman (2014b) found that players with the avatar-as-object orientation were most likely to refer to their avatars as objects, puppets, tools, or toys.

This category aligns with the *gamist* creative agenda **(see Chapter 10)**, which focuses upon achievement, problem solving, and winning challenges (Edwards 2001). This mode of engagement also suggests a strong degree of alibi, in that players perceive their actions in the game or toward the characters mainly through the lens of ludic goals. These players may not view their in-game actions as having any consequences to other players and, thus, view their game behavior as justifiable if technically possible.

## Avatar-as-Me

In the avatar-as-me relationship, the avatar acts as an extension or mirror of the player in the game world while engaging in the ritual practice of play with others. In this sense, the character is not separate from the player, but rather a vehicle through which they can operate (Carr 2002). Often, these avatars will replicate the identity of the player in terms of roles, appearance, and personality. This relationship type also enhances the player’s sense of agency when they experience validation as the result of successfully performing actions through the avatar (Banks 2015). Banks and Bowman (2014b) found that players with the avatar-as-me orientation most refer to their avatars as identities, mirrors, pieces of themselves, representations, or extensions. Such players may view their character as *merging* with their experience of self while playing (Klimmt et al. 2009). This relationship is similar to Bowman’s *Doppelganger Self*, described below.

## Avatar-as-Symbiote

In the avatar-as-symbiote relationship, the character assists the player with identity and sense-making. The character serves as a costume (Merola and Peña 2010) or mask (Galanxhi and Nah 2007), allowing players to craft an alternate persona, often one with idealized personality traits such as heroism, sociability, strength, independence, etc. In this regard, avatars in MORPGs often serve as bridges between the player’s perception of their actual self and their ideal self (Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler 2007). The symbiotic relationship involves the player using the character to practice desirable behaviors. The result of this interaction is that players can bring dimensions of these personality characteristics into their mundane lives (Banks 2015). Unlike avatar-as-me, players with this orientation view their characters as separate, but symbiotic entities, often ones with characteristics they lack. While any role-playing character type can help a player practice traits – even undesirable ones – this category most resembles Bowman’s *Idealized Self*, but could also connect with other categories such as the *Oppositional Self*.

## Avatar-as-Other

When conceiving of an avatar as an “Other,” the player considers the character a distinct social agent. The character exists within the game fiction as independent from the mundane world and has “its own governing systems, life history, and trajectory” (Banks 2015). Players experience a high degree of emotional intimacy with such characters, viewing them as “real amalgam[s] of body, personality, behaviors, and beliefs through and about which new narratives emerge over time” (Banks 2015). While many MORPG games feature an embedded meta-narrative with smaller quest stories, players with the avatar-as-other orientation streamline these stories with player-created ones to establish a linear, narrative reality within which the character exists. In other words, the character may follow pre-scripted narratives provided by the game design, but participants who view their characters as other entities sometimes create new content around their character’s backstory (Moore and Gathman 2007), as well as individualized experiences and relationships that contextualize their personal narrative within the larger ones. This act of narrativization increases the social element of play, as described in more detail in the section on parasocial relationships below. Banks and Bowman (2014b) found that players with the avatar-as-other orientation most commonly referenced their character as a person or partner. These descriptions correlate with all of Bowman’s types as a whole and also connect with her Four Stages of Character Evolution, described below.

## [Box Insert 23.3]

## Stages of Character Evolution and Typology

Sarah Lynne Bowman’s (2010) work on the relationship between players and their characters focuses primarily on participants involved in campaign play with player-generated characters, including text-based role-play, tabletop, and larp. While some of the participants in the study play games that feature a hack-and-slash element such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, her interview questions asked players to reflect upon their relationship with their characters in terms of how they perceive their primary identity characteristics as similar or distinct (Bowman 2010, 183-184).

## Four Stages of Character Evolution

Bowman (2010) describes Four Stages of Character Evolution (156-164), which indicate a trajectory of growth from the initial character concept to greater levels of complexity:

1. *Genesis Stage:*  The player creates the initial concept, usually prompted by others within the gaming group or based upon personal interest. This concept might arise from extensive deliberation or momentary inspiration.
2. *Development Stage:* The player may then proceed to engage in other character building activities, e.g., filling out character sheets, external research, backstory writing, purchasing specific dice, costuming, drawing the character, painting miniatures, etc. Players may develop names, accents, and other personal affectations for their characters. Co-creation with other players may occur during this stage with the establishment of character relationships and narrative dynamics. These activities are not always necessary for Development to occur, but they can help the player become more prepared for play.
3. *Interaction Stage:* The player enacts the character in the role-playing world, interacting with other characters and narratives. Often, the character concept can change dramatically as a result of this stage; characters may veer in unforeseen directions when events occur outside of the player’s control.
4. *Realization Stage:* The player has a strong sense of the character as a distinct entity, including their idiosyncrasies and complexities. The player understands the character’s past and present motivations and sees their existence along a distinct narrative timeline. The character can still grow and change over time after reaching this stage. This stage most resembles Banks’ *avatar-as-other* category as described by MMORPG players (Banks 2015).

Not all characters reach the Realization Stage, nor do all players view these stages as personal goals based upon their creative agendas and motivations. Also, these stages are seen across different styles of play such as long-form one-shot games enacted over several days and campaign play that may take place over months and years.

## Nine Types of Role-playing Characters

Like Banks’ categories, Bowman’s *Nine Types of Player-Characters* detail the ways in which players describe their characters with reference to their own primary identity (164-176). While Banks’ work explores the functional use of the characters as “objects,” Bowman focuses on definitions of the character based upon identity, including social roles, personalities, preferences, attitudes, etc. This typology demonstrates a spectrum approach to character enactment; types range from close to the primary identity - with the Doppelganger Self - to far away - with the Oppositional and Taboo Selves.

These types are descriptive rather than proscriptive. They describe the main themes discussed by RPG players and do not limit other themes as possibilities. Characters may change types over time or occupy multiple types at once. Some types might express themselves more strongly in the character than others.

*Doppelganger Self:*A character that behaves and thinks almost identically to the player’s primary identity. The player may have designed the character as distinct originally, but enacts it as similar to their own identity in practice. Alternatively, the game may encourage players to enact characters “close to home” or identical to the self in fictional circumstances.

*Devoid Self:*A character similar to the primary identity that lacks an essential trait or quality that the player possesses, e.g., a physical disability, lack of empathy, harsher upbringing, etc. This type represents the Doppelganger minus an important facet of the player’s experience.

*Augmented Self:*A character similar to the primary identity with some sort of augmentation, e.g., a superpower, immortality, or inexhaustible wealth. This type represents the Doppelganger plus an important facet that would change the player’s perspective.

*Fragmented Self:*A subdued fragment of the primary identity that becomes accentuated, magnified, or twisted into a distinctive feature of the character. The fragment can represent anything from within the self, e.g., their sensuality, their manipulativeness, their dream of pursuing a certain profession, their interest in a particular field of study, etc. Most characters are Fragmented Selves to greater and lesser degrees. Characters of this type often fall under additional categories, such as Idealized or Taboo Selves.

*Repressed Self:*A regression into an earlier state of consciousness, such as an Inner Child character. The Repressed Self may also represent adolescence or any other earlier life stage. While Bowman (2010) focuses upon human consciousness, the repressed self can also include regression to animalistic states or previous stages of human evolution. This type may also include the enactment of tribal behavior from less Westernized societies or imaginary cultures.

*Idealized Self:*A character that possesses qualities that the player desires, e.g., physical prowess, heroism, seductiveness, keeping calm under pressure, pacifism, extraversion, etc. These qualities may not always correlate with “heroic” traits; for example, a rogue character may fall under the Idealized type depending on the perspective of the player. This type corresponds strongly with Banks’ avatar-as-symbiote(Banks 2015).

*Oppositional Self:*A character in complete opposition to the player’s sense of primary identity. This character might be villainous, but does not always possess negative characteristics. Oppositional selves are sometimes used to explore a mentality or an opposing ideology that the player does not understand. This type may represent the player’s Shadow qualities from a Jungian perspective: elements of the repressed, unconscious personality manifesting through active imagination and creativity (Jung 1976; Bowman 2012; Beltrán 2013). Oppositional selves are common character types; villains or otherwise polarizing figures often create conflict in games, which can result in interesting narratives.

*Experimental Self:*A character created as an experiment in order to explore a bizarre concept, challenge the participant’s role-playing abilities, highlight interesting themes in the game, or test the boundaries of the game experience.

*Taboo Self:*A character meant to explore a social taboo. Taboos may include behaviors such as incest, rape, murder, torture, cannibalism, or abuse. In these situations, the Taboo Self often works to reaffirm the player’s moral stance on these topics after the game rather than subvert it. This type also may describe players enacting gender or sexual identities that conservative communities might find taboo, such as transgenderism, homosexuality, anthropomorphism (e.g. playing animalistic characters), or BDSM. In the latter case, the player may be expressing their own identity or sexuality that mainstream society has deemed inappropriate in their previous experience. Alternatively, a player may wish to experience the perspective of people who have an alternate identity, while not finding it personally relatable. Taboos are culturally specific in this context and might be a part of the game fiction.

Bowman emphasizes the potential for players to engage in self-reflection after enacting these characters, which can lead them to discard unwanted character traits and integrate desired ones into their primary self-concept (see also Rehak 2003). Players may also “activate” aspects of their characters in mundane situations, e.g., enacting or “borrowing” their character’s leadership abilities when giving a speech at work. While not all players undergo this process, Banks reports a similar phenomenon in players who view their avatars-as-symbiotes, who are able to teach them important skills.

## Transfer and Ego-Bleed

Much of the research on role-playing supports the notion that players have learned valuable skills or experienced personal shifts as a result of playing a character. Bowman (2010, 2014) stresses the potential for role-playing games to expand the affective, cognitive, and behavioral skills of players, whether designed for an educational purpose or leisure. Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler (2007) discuss the ways in which MORPGs build a bridge between the player’s perception of their actual self and the ideal self that they wish to become. Yee, Ducheneaut, Yao, and Nelson (2011) explore the concept of the *Proteus effect*, in which players tend to conform to expected attitudes and behaviors based upon their avatar’s appearance in MMORPGs. Such effects may remain limited to the in-game context or transfer to off-game behaviors.

Psychologist Whitney Strix Beltrán (2013) theorizes this notion as *ego-bleed*, in which the identity contents of the character spill over into the primary identities of the players. The degree to which ego-bleed occurs is difficult to determine, as many players describe drawing strong distinctions between their mundane attitudes and behaviors and those of their characters. However, this notion of ego-bleed can help explain how players may constructively choose to enact certain character traits in mundane contexts or how they might use a character to help them practice social skills, such as leadership, courtship, or team work. Another way of understanding this notion of ego-bleed is through the concept of individuation (Jung 1976), where a person engages in active imagination, interacts with archetypal material – such as embodying a character within a fiction – and actively uses those experiences and that content to reconstruct their own sense of self (Bowman 2012).

However, transformational effects are not always positive. Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler (2007) suggest that players reveal both prosocial and antisocial elements of their personalities in online games.

People, in some sense, are their characters while playing World of Warcraft. Others refer to them by the name of their character, and they interact with others as that character. The comparative anonymity offered by the Internet allows players, as their characters, to escape real world norms and expectations and to act out roles and try out personas that range from enhanced versions of their real-life self to alter-egos that behave in reprehensible ways. The player’s character, therefore, is one instance of a possible virtual self. (Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler 2007)

Similarly, Yee (2014) has noted problematic behaviors in online games, such as racism and false gender stereotyping (p. 4). Stenros (2015) discusses the ways in which participants engage in grief play and other activities that feel playful to them, but not to others. Beltrán (2013) discusses these sorts of activities in terms of enacting the *shadow*, meaning playing with content normally repressed or considered socially unacceptable. While shadow or brink play can sometimes prove prosocial, in that players further differentiate their self-concept from such behaviors and reinforce their sense of ethics (Simkins 2010), Beltrán (2013) contends that extended immersion into shadow play runs the risk of ego-bleed from the character of negative characteristics, such as deception, destructive competition, and status jockeying. Such discussions relate to fears around the effects of playing violence in role-playing games. **(see also Chapters 13 and 24)**

# The Sociology of Players and their Characters

While the experience of players with relation to their characters is primarily an individual and, therefore, psychological one, some social dimensions are important to explore. Players exist within a community of play and characters exist within a community of fiction. Studying the relationship between players and characters necessitates also evaluating the social environments within which they exist, e.g. the norms of the play culture, the affordances of the system, and fictional limitations. This section will explore the sociological dimensions of the player-character relationship. **(see also Chapters 12 and 22)**

## Playing Gender, Race, and Sexuality

One of the benefits of enacting a fictional character is the ability to portray someone from a vastly different social experience than the player’s mundane life. For example, a cis-gendered male can play a female-identified character. Players can enact different races, ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, and even species depending on the game. The degree of embodiment may impact the experience. For example, players may more reliably “pass” as another gender in virtual spaces with less cues as to their mundane social identity, such as voice, photographs, or other indications. For this reason, people from marginalized identities often report virtual spaces as freeing of social constraints that might otherwise hinder them, such as differences in ablebodiedness, race, or gender (Pineiro-Escoriaza 2008). In fact, some players prefer to present themselves using a more socially commanding avatar to garner respect, such as a short, Filipino woman feeling empowered by playing a tall, black male avatar in *Everquest* (Levine 2007).

Additionally, larp and tabletop groups often allow for crossplay and other alternative social identity performances. Indeed, players sometimes use these spaces to explore aspects of their own gender or sexuality that are normally suppressed, such as transgender or non-binary gender identities, or queer desires (Bowman 2010). Such character performances can lead to players feeling more emboldened to come out in their everyday lives.

In terms of virtual games, scholars have made efforts to quantify instances of alternative gender performance and racial diversity in representation. Yee, Ducheneaut, Yao, and Nelson (2011) found that in a sample of 1,084 participants, 53.3% of males had at least one female character, as opposed to 18.5% of women who played at least one male character. Interestingly, the authors found that gendered behavior tended to reproduce in these instances, as male players would perform traditionally feminine roles as female characters, including healing and other support roles. Similarly, female players displayed masculine behaviors while enacting male characters, including player-versus-player aggressive moves.

However, racial diversity still remains problematic in many role-playing spaces (Waddell 2014). Whether by player choice or affordances of the game space, MORPGs still remain overwhelmingly white, even with greater customization of avatars available (Higgin 2009). While some people of color may choose to play a white character to avoid stigma, others often feel frustrated by this lack of representation, especially in fantasy worlds where social realities are designable to reflect more progressive social ideals (Beltrán, 2015). Other issues in terms of character enactment and representation are connected to cultural appropriation or stereotyping, where enactments are considered offensive or hurtful to people from marginalized groups. Thus, while many players and designers encourage a greater diversity of portrayals, they also suggest that such representations require a certain degree of sensitivity and research (Long, 2016).

## Parasocial relationships

One fascinating element of the player relationship to character is the potential for the participant to relate to the avatar or alterego as a distinct social person. These parasocial relationships can vary, such as treating an avatar in an MORPG as a child or loved one that needs care (Banks and Bowman 2014a), worrying about how a particular narrative in a campaign larp might negatively impact one’s ongoing character, or engaging in upkeep of a character’s stats. Such relationships are less about the player’s personal feelings when embodying the character and more about viewing the avatar as an independent entity that one feels responsible for maintaining. Here, the player experiences a higher degree of separation from the character, but also a high feeling of intimacy (Banks 2015).

However, players likely switch between modes of immersion. In other words, a player may experience their character both as a deeply psychological experience and as a social relationship. Additionally, such modes of identification may shift depending upon when a player reflects upon them or when queried in interviews or surveys.

# Summary

The relationship between the player and character in role-playing games is one of the most interesting subjects in the field of role-playing studies, in part because the distinction is somewhat unique to other sorts of gaming experiences, such as poker, bridge, or sports. We have highlighted psychological and sociological factors, including:

* Multiplicity, or the distinction between player and character, and the extent to which players relate to and identify with their characters.
* Gender, race, and sexuality connections and how social norms and categories in the real world may relate to those enacted through play.

While identity exploration through character enactment is often experienced as pleasurable and even life-changing, certain drawbacks are necessary to understand, especially in terms of antisocial play. Studying this dynamic further can help illuminate the popularity, the pleasures, and the potentials afforded by role-playing games.

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## Box Insert 23.1: Problematic Usage

Some researchers worry about the use of role-playing as an escape from concerns in mundane life (e.g. Williams, Kennedy, and Moore 2011). In this regard, the fantasy of enacting a character, particularly in a long-term campaign setting such as an ongoing larp or MORPG, might become a form of addiction, which some researchers prefer to call problematic usage (Peters and Malesky 2008). If players often view their characters as idealized selves, the desire to immerse oneself in a more empowered identity might become absorbing, a process Fine (1983) calls *overinvolvement*. Interestingly, Williams, Kennedy, and Moore (2011) found that intensive role-players in MORPGs – who made up only 5% of the total respondents of their sample– were quantitatively more likely to come from marginalized groups and have physical or personal challenges. However, interviews revealed that these players found their engagement with the game increased their sociability and self-expression. Such studies show that, when determining problematic usage, simply measuring aspects like time spent playing or neuroatypicality may prove less instructive than personal interviews about the lived experiences, uses, and gratifications of players.

**Box Insert 23.2: Steering Theory**

Steering theory (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015; Pohjola 2015) in role-playing studies offers another analogy for describing how enveloped by the character the player becomes in terms of personal identification and ego control. The analogy involves driving a car. The participant may perceive their primary consciousness as residing in the trunk, the back seat, the passenger seat, or behind the wheel while the character is “driving,” indicating degrees of player direction and control.

## Box Insert 23.3: Anonymity and Griefing

As mentioned, not all behaviors in role-playing environments are prosocial. One common example of upsetting or hurtful behavior occurs in online settings, where players experience a greater degree of anonymity, although players in analog role-playing games may feel a similar degree of distancing due to the fiction or other reasons. So, some players may use the game space to “grief” others, with behaviors such as repeatedly killing a character each time they resurrect in MORPGS (Chen, Duh, and Ng 2009), or using mechanics, harassment, or social humiliation to overpower others in analog games (Stenros 2015). This anonymity causes a form of *deindividuation*, where individuals lose their sense of social responsibility, similar to the concept of alibi in role-play studies. Chen, Duh, and Ng (2009) discuss four categories of griefing in this regard, which are provoked by the following factors: the game world, such as boredom and testing limits; other players, such as spite and vulnerability; other griefers, such as ritualization, group identity, and reputation; and the self, such as moodiness, needing attention, wanting to feel powerful, and role-playing motivations (342). **(see also Chapter 24)** Such antisocial behaviors may cause problems for individual players or the social community at large. Thus, for online games, game creators have experimented with ways to minimize and reduce griefing behavior. Similarly,

a greater emphasis on social responsibility for emotional safety amongst players has emerged in the discourse on analog games (Brown 2016; Koljonen 2016).

# List of keywords defined in callouts at the end of the document

Crossplay