

# “Let me get my alt:” Digital identiti(es) in multiplayer games

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## ABSTRACT

Online gamers rarely have a single identity: instead, they manage an array of “alts” that they use depending on their gaming context. Although current games allow players to switch between these diverse facets of their gaming life, the process is far from perfect. In this paper we briefly report on current identity management practices in multiplayer games and the issues that arise. In particular, we describe how current representations of a player’s body (or avatar) can be too constraining. We then propose alternative ways to construct representations of digital identities closer to the practices gamers engage in.

## Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.5.3 [Group and Organization Interfaces]: Synchronous interaction.

## General Terms

Human Factors.

## Keywords

Multiplayer games, avatars, identity management.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Multiplayer games have become a social phenomenon in their own right. Hundreds of thousands of players [12] routinely connect to their favorite first-person shooter (e.g. Counter-Strike, [13]) or massively multiplayer role-playing game (MMORPGs such as EverQuest, Star Wars Galaxies - see [4]). In most of these games, players control a virtual body or “avatar” in richly detailed 3D worlds. However, unlike the physical world, the one body/one person principle does not hold in multiplayer games (much like in other electronic environments, see [11]).

This symmetry is broken down in several ways. In MMORPGs, designers frequently encourage the creation of multiple avatars under the same account. One can, for instance, develop two or three different personas (e.g. a warrior and a magician) and experiment with their various attributes. These avatars, however, are not meant to enter the world at the same time: gamers are constrained by another restriction, the one machine/one avatar principle, by which technological limitations implemented by the game designers prevent players from using multiple avatars at the same time. But power gamers have been known to ruthlessly exploit this feature [10]: the practice of “two-boxing”, that is, using two separate PCs in parallel to control two avatars simultaneously

is well-documented. This allows one of the avatars to be used to train the second one, for instance, and progress in the game at an accelerated pace.

While the above is arguably an extreme form of identity management, more casual gamers also routinely switch between avatars on a single machine. MMORPGs require players to form well-balanced groups, with a good representation of each possible game “profession” since they are highly dependent from each other [4, 7]. Warriors, for instance, need clerics to heal their wounds in EverQuest. Therefore, a common sentence is often heard at the time of group formation: “let me get my alt.” By this the player means that his or her current character is poorly suited to the current group configuration, and that he or she will log out and log back in under a different guise (for instance, trading their warrior avatar for a cleric). This way, players explore different facets of their gaming life while maximizing their opportunities for group (as opposed to solo) playing.

In first-person shooters a different problem arises. Here players are offered a very limited range of avatars to choose from. For instance in Counter-Strike, players can choose between only four different terrorist or counter-terrorist uniforms. Since their virtual bodies cannot be customized, players instead rely heavily on another resource to manage their identity: their names. These can be fairly elaborate, using a combination of text, numbers and symbols to create a unique sounding (and often looking) nickname (e.g. \_-[AzN]RoCKr=-\_). This process of identity management is crucial since reputation is what players really fight for in “twitch” games like Counter-Strike. To get bragging rights and be respected as a good FPS player, one has to be able to reliably associate a name with performance first [13]. Players have therefore extended practices dating back to the days of text-only games and social environments like MUDs [3].

The PlayOn project at PARC has been investigating the social dimensions of multiplayer games for more than a year. We have conducted “virtual ethnographies” [6] as well as automatic data collection and analysis [4] in several online worlds: EverQuest, Star Wars Galaxies, Counter-Strike, and more recently City of Heroes. The identity management practices we have outlined above are based on our observations. In the remainder of this paper, we will briefly discuss what we consider to be the three most important identity management issues in current online games. We then propose ways to address these issues by using a player’s body differently than how it is currently done. In particular, we illustrate how games need to move away from the restrictions imposed by the one body/one machine/one person paradigm to promote instead digital identities that are both flexible and

consistent. This should promote accountability, trust, and reputation building and beneficially affect the social fabric of gaming communities.

## 2. GAMING IDENTITIES

As a prelude to our discussion of identity management in multiplayer games, consider the collage below. All screenshots are from the same player: a 28-year-old male with more than 20 years of gaming experience in several game genres. Note the three different “alts” from SWG and how impossible it is to tie them back to a single account based on physical characteristics alone. Also note the diverse range of identities assumed across games.

## 3. THREE ISSUES AND POSSIBILITIES

Based on our observations, we think that identity management in multiplayer games currently faces three major issues. We briefly discuss possibilities for working around them below. It is worth noting, however, that these suggestions are based on fantasy and the “make believe” nature of games – they might not be applicable to all environments, and their consequences on each specific game environment would need to be considered carefully.

## 3.1 In game: consistency and flexibility

Online games, and social cyberspaces in general, are often touted as liberating environments where one is free to explore facets of their personality repressed by the constraints of “real life.” While this can certainly be the case (there is a substantial population of role-players in Star Wars Galaxies, for instance), our experience with multiplayer games reveals that a complete disconnection between online selves and player can be problematic.

This is particularly true *within* a single game environment (we discuss similar issues across games in section 3.2). Remember our discussion of “alts” earlier in this paper: it is quite frequent for players to maintain several different avatars on the same server in order to play the game from different angles but, most importantly, to form balanced groups. This can be very confusing for other members of the community: there is no way to know that Gandalf the wizard and Bilbo the Hobbit are, in fact, played by the same individual, unless members of the party have been forewarned (hence the ubiquitous “let me get my alt”).



The major problems here have to do with the long-term consequences of this disconnection on the game's society. The group of players witnessing the switch from, say, a main to an alt knows about the connection between these two avatars, but the remaining population does not. And it has been argued that, in order to promote interaction and cooperation in online environments, repeated encounters between the same individuals are primordial [8]. Because of the "alt switching" practice, we have observed that on occasion, players who have previously met will meet again under alternate identities that they don't know about. They will therefore have to rebuild their relationship from scratch. This potentially weakens the social fabric of the game.

There is, therefore, a need for online gamers to tie back together the disconnected facets of their avatars' lives. During our observations we came across many and often complex discussions between players explaining to each other the ecology of avatars they were maintaining on the same server. These practices are very interesting when considered in light of classic sociological frameworks such as Goffman's dramaturgical perspective [5]. Goffman rightly proposed that members of society routinely segregate their "audiences" in order to create boundaries between the different facets of their socially constructed selves. And it has been recently proposed that some social cyberspaces, and in particular social networking services like Friendster, are problematic because they collapse several segregated facets of an individual's life into a single, easily accessible profile [1]. Interestingly, multiplayer online games illustrate the opposite problem: namely, they fragment an individual's online life into several disconnected digital identities.

There are, however, ways to work around the problem. One possibility for expressing relationship between connected identities is kinship groups. Members of a family, for instance, share some traits and not others. Instead of creating completely different avatars, players could be given control of a family of avatars. The first created avatar would be the elder; subsequently created avatars would be sons and daughters, sharing visible physical attributes with their elder. This way players who bump into a sibling of an avatar they have encountered before know that the same individual controls them all. They also know the relationship between these avatars (e.g. a low level son of a "master magician" benefits from the reputation of his digital father). At the same time, this leaves enough room for role-playing and the exploration of different game skills. The most important aspect is that repeated encounters can now be attributed to the proper individual, which in turn better supports the accumulation of social capital.

Of course, these connections need to remain optional. Players sometime willingly create segregated identities, and want them to remain separate. Still we believe that a large majority of players would benefit from mechanisms connecting their avatar collection more strongly.

While we have discussed how connection between a unique player's avatars could be established over time and during repeated encounters, another problem remains: how to manage the transition between one identity to the next during gameplay. For now, due to constraints imposed by the game designers, players have to log out, select a new identity, and then log back in. This can be quite disruptive: the alt could, for instance, be located far away in the game world, and it

would therefore take the player a lot of time to bring it back to where the main left. In the meantime, the group may have become impatient and left. It is therefore an area where the imposition of constraints modeled after the physical world is detrimental to gaming. We believe instead that bodies should be allowed to be exchanged "on the spot." Mechanisms consistent with the game world could be employed. For instance in CoH, a game notorious for its ease of grouping between players encouraging "casual" gaming, some group members can teleport any other player to them. This way one can leave his main, transition to an alt, and immediately pick up where they left off.

More generally, what we are arguing for here is to consider gaming identities more like masks than bodies. Anthropologists alert us to the symbolic function of masks, and their importance in games – especially those of simulation or mimicry [2]. Masks allow immediate, flexible transitions between identities independent of the physical characteristics of their wearer. Transitions can be done "in place", without the need for backstage work. Right now games are surprisingly inflexible as a stage: they could be much more inspired by techniques borrowed from the world of acting and make-believe.

### 3.2 Across games: reputation

Another important issues with "alts" is reputation. This is particularly problematic across different games. As our collage above illustrates, the multiple facets of a gamer's identity are very difficult to connect based on appearance alone. Yet establishing this connection can be very important, especially when claims about performance have to be made.

When forming groups, multiplayer gamers often segregate themselves into "newbies" and "elites." Within a particular game this distinction is usually made based on some statistics provided by the designers (e.g. level in MMORPGs, "kills" or "frags" in FPS). Yet these are, in essence, imperfect. First a player might be just starting a new avatar while he already possesses a collection of more advanced ones (see above). More generally, he or she might be just starting this particular game while having years of experience with this particular *genre* of game (e.g. just starting Far Cry but having played Quake and Doom for ten years).

Therefore, it would be beneficial for players to be able to reliably assess one's reputation and experience. To do so probably requires a third party service keeping track of players' performances (ladders are already being used in the world of FPSs). The interesting question for us is how this experience should be manifested in the game.

One way would be to use a player's avatar to reflect the player's overall gaming experience. Certain characteristics of a body lend themselves well to displaying experience. Age is an obvious one, yet in most game today it is generally not customizable (all avatars are generally young and in good health – a surprisingly skewed definition of society, as some have also noted with ethnicity [9]). When it is customizable it bears no relationship with a character's history. Instead avatars could easily be made to look older based on the reputation data obtained from the third-party service. Alternative possibilities include scars and other form of body inscriptions (e.g. tattoos) that could be granted based on one's experience, and maintained across games. The key point is to tie one or

several of a character's physical attributes back to a reputation mechanism that has meaning within and across games.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have briefly described current identity management practices in multiplayer games. Based on this data, we have illustrated how avatars, the physical embodiment of a player, are currently the source of several problems. The limitations of having only one body/one machine/one player in the world at the same time deprive gamers of mechanisms to manage their online personas with consistency and flexibility. This also makes it hard to reliably assess a player's experience. We proposed avenues game designers might consider to move beyond these limitations. Considering identity management is a pressing issue, as current mechanisms may eventually weaken the social fabric of a gaming community.

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