

Playing with subjectivity: Virtual autobiography in videogames

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Abstract

This paper examines some of the ways that Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG)s such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) disperses and fragments subjectivity by enabling players to create their game experiences into virtual autobiographies through the recognition that these experiences are perceived simultaneously by the individual and the avatar. The theories of Lacan, Rehak and Bakhtin will be discussed in relation to how traditional notions of subjectivity adapt to virtual environments in MMORPGs, drawing examples from player dossiers and short film. Finally, some implications that virtual autobiographies have on the future of subjectivity in an increasingly virtual world will be briefly outlined.

Key words

virtual, autobiography, video game, narrative, World of Warcraft, subjectivity.

Narrative is a “human phenomenon” which occurs not just in literature, film and drama, but in all aspects of everyday human life and discourse in all its forms ([Porter Abbott, 2002](#), Preface) – written, spoken, visual, audio, and increasingly the virtual multimodal discourse of informational technology. As that technology continues to rapidly evolve and become an increasingly more and more pervasive and complex component of everyday life, so too do the ways in which human beings experience and narrativise their lives, selves and the world. My focus in this paper is on the effects of narrative in videogame playing on player subject positions, in particular the ways in which Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG’s) such as *World of Warcraft* ([Blizzard Entertainment, 2004](#)), fragment and disperse users’ subjectivity by enabling them to record their game experiences as virtual autobiographies perceived simultaneously through the eyes of both the individual and avatar.

Digital technology made the production of virtual autobiographies available to the masses. As society embarks further into an e- (electronic) world, traditional notions of subjectivity and literacy are becoming problematic. Over the last decade there has been an ongoing debate between scholars of narrative studies and of game studies. The former argue that games can be studied as narratives, the latter that they cannot. A particular strand of the debate focuses on the differing player-subject positions in games. Frasca explains, “Observers are passive, the player is active. If the player does not act, there will be no game, and therefore no [narrative] session at all. It is a completely different activity to watch a game and to play the game” ([1999](#), ludus and narrative section, para. 23). However what Frasca fails to acknowledge is that when playing a game observation is also active. [Rehak \(2003\)](#) argues that when playing a game the individual is simultaneously both passive

observer and active player as the act of play also requires an observation of that play. He refers to the process as a “‘structure of seeing’ in which the subject, acting on its desires to see itself as other, pursues its reflection in the imaginary like a cat chasing its tail” (p. 119). The subject is positioned on a liminal boundary between the virtual self and the corporeal self. The player’s subjectivity is thus projected into the virtual world, developing within it during game play and reciprocally the virtual world influences the subjectivity of the player.

The term *virtual autobiography* in video games refers to a narrative account of a player’s interactions with a virtual environment; that is, an environment constructed by a computer program. The psychological connection between the player and their avatar in a virtual environment is key to the concept of virtual autobiography in video games as it provides the autobiographical component. Rehak (2003) contends “the crucial relationship in many games...is not between avatar and environment or even between protagonist and antagonist, but between the human player and the image of him or herself encountered onscreen” (p. 104). The connection Rehak (2003) refers to is developed from Jacques Lacan’s mirror stage:

...the ego formed through identification with a reflection or representation of itself is thus forever split, rendered incomplete by the very distinction that enables self-recognition... the split subject goes through life alienated from itself and its needs, endlessly seeking in external resources the “lost object” (objet petit a) from which it was initially severed. (Rehak, 2003, p. 105-106)

Both Lacan and Rehak argue that as individuals our subjectivity is inherently fragmented and Rehak uses Lacan’s theory in order to describe the psychological connection created subconsciously between players and avatars in videogames.

The video game avatar would seem to meet the criteria of Lacan’s objet petit a. Appearing on screen in place of the player, the avatar does double duty as self and other, symbol and index.

As self, its behaviour is tied to the player's through an interface (keyboard, mouse, joystick): its literal motion as well as its figurative triumphs and defeats, result from the player's actions. At the same time, avatars are unequivocally other. Both limited and freed by difference from the player, they can accomplish more than the player alone; they are supernatural ambassadors of agency. (Rehak, 2003, p. 106-107)

Thus while a player knows that a character onscreen is "fictional", it does not mean that a player does not view the avatar as a reflection or extension of themselves. The avatar's "'eyes', 'ears', and 'body'...are components of a complex technological and psychological apparatus" (Rehak, 2003, p. 104) that creates a powerful connection of self-recognition between the player and their avatar that enables a player to conduct a virtual autobiography of their experiences.

When a player logs into a virtual world in a MMORPG they are entering a culturally diverse community. Individuals of differing age, race, culture and gender from around the globe come together in a melting pot of players and avatars, mediated by the administrators who enforce the games' rules and codes of conduct. While it is possible to play an MMORPG like *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) without interacting with other players, more often than not intersubjective relationships form within the game. Theorist [Mikhail Bakhtin \(1929/1984\)](#) argues that an individual's subjectivity is constituted through their dialogic relationships with others.

I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another. The most important acts constituting self-consciousness are determined by a relationship toward another consciousness, (towards a *thou*). Separation, dissociation, and enclosure within the self as the main reason for the loss of one's self. Not that which takes place within, but that which takes place on the *boundary* between one's own and someone else's consciousness, on the *threshold*. (p. 287)

Bakhtin's emphasis on the importance of relationships to the development of the self is analogous to avatariation development in MMORPGs. The concept of "boundary" and "threshold" that Bakhtin discusses is synonymous to the player-avatar relationship in that it is encountered on the boundary between the virtual and corporeal world. The relationships developed between players in a virtual world thus reflect the Bakhtinian notion of subjectivity as formulated through interaction with others. While it is not necessary to play with others to progress in games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment, 2004) playing with others can increase the rate at which one advances, presents opportunities for achievement that are not possible when playing alone and thus develops the player's interaction with the virtual environment. Intersubjective relationships in-game offer a sense of community that parallels the "real" world.

For Bakhtin (1929/1984), subjectivity is viewed as positive. It is developed dialogically, it is fluid and multifaceted. The future of subjectivity brings both the promise of a new subjectivity and dismay at the death of the traditional concept. Elaborating on William Burrough's term "terminal identity", [Bukatman \(1993\)](#) argues the future of subjectivity is in fact "terminal". It is characterised by "an unmistakably doubled articulation in which we find both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen" (p. 9). Drawing on the work of Scott Bukatman and Katherine Hayles, [McCallum \(2008\)](#) argues that the implications for virtual subjectivity in the future positions an individual's experience of subjectivity as fragmented between a theoretical death of the traditional subject and the birth of a new type of subjectivity.

Breaches of the boundaries between the materiality of lived experience and the illusion of virtual reality have ambivalent implications for subjectivity: the 'subject that can occupy or intersect with the cyberspaces of contemporary existence' (Bukatman, p.8) can figure both a

dystopian dissolution or disembodiment of the subject within the virtual, the 'death of the subject' and a utopian vision of the self as 'distributed cognition', a new subjectivity (Hayles, pp.290-1). (McCallum, in Bradford et al. 2008, p. 172).

Existing on a liminal boundary between the material and virtual, virtual autobiographies in video games are a response to the changing functions of games, literacy, communication, and intersubjective relationships brought forth by informational and digital technologies. When "platforms, templates, and modes of communicative exchange increase and intersect hypertextually, they add to the forms of visual life narrative produced during the twentieth century virtual forms of social networking systems that link people around the world instantaneously and interactively" ([Smith & Watson, 2010](#), pp. 167-168). In a world where it is argued that current modes of literacy do not fully reflect the technological society we live in ([Zimmerman, 2009](#)), new concepts and ideologies emerge to transform existing systems of thought. "Play emerges from more rigid systems...It plays with them, modifying, transgressing, and reinventing...As a paradigm for innovation in the coming century, play will increasingly inform how we learn, work, and create culture" (Zimmerman, 2009, p. 28). Virtual Autobiography in videogames is thus a useful platform from which to examine virtual subjectivity as it allows for an insight into the liminal aspect of fragmented subjectivity available through play.

Although there are various methods of recording virtual game experiences such as player dossiers, video web logs and written narrative, this paper will draw examples from the creation of a short autobiographical film. Each mode of autobiography differs in style and technique but essentially all forms record events in the game that are unique to each individual and their avatar.

The player dossier is arguably the crudest form of recording in a video game and this is attributed to the way in which the game experiences are collected and recorded. [Medler \(2011\)](#) defines player dossiers as “data-driven visual reports comprised of a player’s gameplay data. These reports are mediators connecting players to the vast collections of gameplay data being recorded within games... representing each player’s identity, morphing over time as the player continues to play” (para. 2). The *World of Warcraft Armory* ([Blizzard Entertainment, 2013](#)) allows players to view their own and other’s character computer generated profiles that include features such as talents, events, achievements, professions, reputation, activity feeds, friends and guild information that is unique to the individual character. Alternatively individual game statistics can also be accessed by a player within the game and compared to other players that are physically selected. Player dossiers mirror the development of subjectivity in individuals. Acting similar to an accumulation and recollection of past memories, they include fragmented recordings of a series of events, achievements won, special events attended, skills acquired and so forth, varying in the level of detail over a period of game play, shaping a player’s identity.

While being useful tools for personal development and growth, player dossiers are inherently problematic for the portrayal of identity as virtual autobiography because they are automatically recorded by a computer program and not by the user thus separating users from the authorial act of self-recording. The removal of a player’s authorial intent combined with the methods of displaying the game’s data suggest that player dossiers are closer to a biography than an autobiography of player experience; however they still significantly impact a user’s experience of subjectivity in a virtual environment.

Player dossiers grant users the “ability to provide personalized data and construct meaningful information about their identity, which is consumed by other users” (Medler,

2011). Embodying a Bakhtinian view of subjectivity through interaction with others, users consume each other's data thus affecting or shaping the formation of personal user identity. However traditional notions of subjectivity that constitute an individual's identity such as gender, race and age are of little to no importance or value in player dossiers because they do not directly alter an individual's game data. Player dossiers contribute to the formulation of a player's identity by dispersing a player's experience of subjectivity visually through the computer screen as they witness a fragmented external output of themselves comprised as pieces of raw data. Player dossiers endorse a competition-based environment, positioning the subject in opposition to others and promoting an aspirational avatar-player relationship that ultimately affects self development.

Jimmy: The World of Warcraft Story ([Moran, 2007](#)), is a short autobiographical film that embodies the nature of fragmented subjectivity in virtual autobiography. Moran's film tells the story of a broken friendship between two players and their characters: Mojache (the narrator) and Jimmy, his best friend. After choosing to ally with two competing factions in the game, the friends find their relationship damaged beyond repair. The film, whilst accessible to the public, is overloaded with comical and sometimes crude in-game references that viewers who have not played the game may not understand. However the basic narrative has universal themes of friendship, identity and loyalty that are easily accessible to non-playing viewers. The anecdotal "what not to do" experience of Mojache is recorded in-game and edited with music, audio and camera techniques, rather than just a recorded session of continuous game play. The opening scene of the film begins with the avatar Mojache facing the camera asking "is it working?" (Moran, 2007) – referring to the camera as though the avatar was making a video blog. He introduces himself to the audience, "hi, my name's Mojache, I'm a level 69 mage here on Trollbane" (Moran, 2007). In

this introduction Moran has begun by using the first person pronoun, a technique typical of the autobiography genre. The speaker/player refers to himself as Mojache, the name of the avatar and not the name of the player. This moment is important to the creation of the virtual autobiography as it signifies the “avatarial relation” discussed by Rehak (2003) earlier: the speaker is both player and avatar – self and other – eternally divided pursuing an unobtainable unified subjectivity.

As the film progresses Moran fluctuates between the material and the virtual worlds by referencing objects and subjects that a player would encounter both inside and outside of the game. Mojache and Jimmy travel to Shattrath City together and once they arrive they are asked to choose between two competing factions; Aldors and Scryers. Instead of simply choosing a faction based upon information provided by the game designers Mojache chooses instead to partake in the act of meta gaming, which is when a player goes beyond the paradigms of the game to access information or items that ultimately affect the game’s outcome ([Institute of Play, 2013](#)). Mojache states, “naturally, I whipped up the Thottbot and looked up the rewards” (Moran, 2007). This dialogue is accompanied by footage of the player in the process of exiting the virtual game world and accessing the website Thottbot.com, an external search engine not produced by Blizzard entertainment that allows individuals to view rewards for quests. After arguing over which faction to pick based on the rewards they offered, the friends part ways and the narrative transfers back into the virtual world, “Jimmy said...he was gonna go do some... *Aldor* quests with some of his *Aldor* crew...so I checked out the Scryers place” (Moran, 2007). Through this scene the viewer is able to witness Moran playing with the concept of subjectivity by fluctuating between the actual and the virtual world. The player’s actions outside of the game clearly affected the intersubjective relationship between himself and Jimmy, which in turn changed the way in

which the player experienced the virtual environment. Through the use of images and dialogue Moran thus shows how a player is situated directly on the boundary between both worlds. The film comes to a close and the friends find their issues unresolved with Jimmy simply quitting the game. *Jimmy: The World of Warcraft Story* (Moran, 2007) portrays how a user's experience of subjectivity is essentially fragmented, positioned on the liminal boundary between the player and the avatar, the passive and the active, the material and the virtual yet constituted through an essentially Bakhtinian notion of subjectivity; identity as developed in relation to others.

Technology is advancing at a rapid pace and the ways in which we theorise subjectivity in an ever increasing electronic environment will continue to transform and adapt to the surrounding global milieu. Rehak (2003) used the Lacanian concept of subjectivity to explain the player-avatar relationship and this paper applied the Bakhtinian notion of subjectivity formulated on the "boundary" and "threshold" between one's own and another's consciousness to emphasise the importance of virtual autobiography in MMORPG's as a platform to examine the significance of liminality in the development of subjectivity in an exceedingly virtual world.

When immersed within the virtual world of an MMORPG, players are positioned on a liminal boundary between the material and the virtual. When a player's activity is self-recorded in the form of virtual autobiography the avatar is granted agency on behalf of the player, under their control. Thus subjectivity is developed on the threshold of active and passive participation with the narrative, between the player and the avatar, between the avatar and the avatars of other players and the individuals who command them. Virtual autobiographies in MMORPG's problematise traditional ideas of what it is to be a subject

when immersed in a virtual world thus when an individual creates a virtual autobiography in a video game they are virtually playing with subjectivity.

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