

MAPPING PERSONA AND GAMES

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INTRODUCTION

For those new to games studies, the most important primer is the recognition that, as a field of research, it is at its most revealing when in conversation with perspectives from other fields and domains of inquiry. Espen Aarseth (2001) announced that the first issue of *Game Studies*, the international journal of computer game research, marked the commencement of computer game studies. Aarseth's editorial launched the trajectory for the following two decades of game research, obscuring much of the previous work examining digital and analogue games that had contributed to the tipping point at which the fields' coalescence could become a reality. Emerging from media studies, sociology, and a particular tradition of textual analysis in cinema and literature studies, games studies has since had a reputation for being the latest kid on the block. Like persona studies, game studies features key moments in which intersections between it and other fields and their theoretical and analytical perspectives prove enlightening, enriching, and even entertaining.

A good example of game studies' lively intersections is the legendarily overinflated idea of the debate between two schools of thought regarding how game studies should advance. On the one hand, are the Ludologists, who emphasise attention to the role of game mechanics and rules. On the other are the Narratologists, who focus on the way games tell stories using narrative theory. Gonzalo Frasca (2003) rather famously both debunked and reinforced the idea of the schism in his conference presentation "Ludologists love stories, too: notes from a debate that never took place", helping to cement the idea that these two directions are somehow separate. Similarly, another infamous intersection in games studies emerged from Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's (2004) almost offhand use of the term 'magic circle', which was taken from the often-quoted passage of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga's *Homo Ludens* (playful human) (1970 [1938]), which explores the theory that play is a necessary condition of the generation of culture. The popularity of games as a 'magic circle' helped perpetuate the misconception that games are somehow magically apart from everyday life and reality (Pargman and Jakobsson 2008; Moore 2011). Perhaps most notoriously, is the intersection between game studies and psychology and the decades of research that have failed to show conclusive evidence about perceived links between video games and aggression in adolescents, despite some research purporting to reveal minor correlations between the two (Shao and Wang 2019).

Contemporary game studies is filled with a vibrant array of voices and contributions that intersect productively with progressive social justice concerns, including attention to race (Ta 2014), gender (Dahya *et al.* 2017), and sexuality (Ruberg & Shaw 2017), but the field has also gained much from its self-awareness and interrogation of its more problematic directions and its ongoing work in correcting commonly held misapprehensions about games and the ways they are produced and enjoyed. Misconceptions also abound for those new to persona studies, which draws on diverse multidisciplinary contributions ranging from sociology and psychology to symbolic interactionism to performance studies and the broader traditions of cultural studies and media studies. More acutely, persona studies emerged from the theoretical and analytical research trajectories of celebrity studies (Marshall and Barbour 2015) and fan studies (Moore

2020). The work published in this journal also features connections to legal studies, politics, and history, and in the future, seeks to make greater connections to the social sciences, linguistics and languages, science, engineering and technology studies, among many other disciplines, in order to expand its interdisciplinary goals. We continue to strive against the idea that a persona is equivalent to a brand and that persona is a function of being human. It remains our task to seek an understanding of the ways animals, machines, objects, locations, and other non-humans may be able to possess a degree of agency to which they can be said to enact a persona. The 'Diversifying Persona Studies' online international conference to be held in July 2021 and the corresponding special issue of the journal will be an important time for the field and its contributors to explore these directions and possibilities further.

At its most direct, a persona is a negotiation between the individual and the collective (Marshal et al. 2020). This definition aims not to be vague but inclusive, as both the individual and the collective can include a range of performances, processes, platforms, and things. Persona studies is certainly interested in various identity theories, but it is not limited by them. Rather it seeks to examine the networks of relations involved in the presentation of the public self in the contemporary moment. However, the 'self' concept is usually restricted to individual personhood, which conflicts with the way contributors to this journal have explored what persona means and what its broader relevance is. This issue is a good example of how the intersection between two relatively new domains of inquiry helps to complicate the notions of persona and the 'self', as well as the collective, beyond simple anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism. This could be expanded in future with attention to the way game studies has considered the degree to which form inspires function, beginning with Montford and Bogost's (2009) contribution to the *Platform Studies* series that examines the way computing systems enable and constrain creative expression. Another untapped direction in games studies that has implications for persona studies, is the focus on embodiment, especially Keogh's (2018) approach that explores the connections between the hardware and software of both computers and human bodies.

Games studies' previous proximity to persona studies is perhaps most closely reflected in work contributing to the analysis of avatars. The works of Thomas Apperley and Justin Clemens (2016, 2017) and their research with others (de Wildt *et al.* 2019, Albarrán-Torres & Apperley 2019) provides a foundation to understand the similarity and difference in the two approaches. Where the avatar defines the players' experience of a game world (Apperley & Clemens 2016, p. 114), the player's persona exists as an expression of agency as to how the player (and game designer) uses avatars to represent themselves both in games and outside of them, whether through multiplayer games, role-playing games, or as a game fan via social media (see Moore 2014). Just as the avatar functions to shape and modify human behaviour inside the game world (Apperley & Clemens 2017, p. 52), the algorithmic and participatory nature of social media platforms similarly both afford and constrain the expression of persona online. Furthermore, van Ryn, Apperley and Clemens' (2018) study of avatar economics highlights the cross over between attention to avatars and what is described as the 'affective turn' in the humanities, drawing on the work of scholars like Deleuze and Guatarri and Brian Massumi to explore the relations between game design and player investment and innervation (see also Moore 2010; 2011; 2012).

This issue brings together several key trajectories of games studies and persona studies by mapping some of the connections and distinctions these research fields offer. Games provide a broad range of opportunities to examine how persona formations occur both within entertainment and leisure experiences and within the broader industry that produces and supports them. The study of games and persona is an opportunity to recognise and promote

interest in the wider 'play' of game-related personas performed by game designers, fans, and content creators, beyond simple stereotypes associated with player types and identity formations. In the following articles, we hope to stimulate conversations, challenge assumptions, and promote future research trajectories.

Role-playing games present an interesting challenge and opportunity to expand the understanding of persona, which is evident in Burgess and Jones's survey of fans of the PS4 exclusive, *Horizon Zero Dawn*. Developed by Guerrilla Games and published by Sony for their console in 2017, the action-adventure RPG title is distinctive for its female protagonist. However, in examining player's responses to and investment in both player characters (PCs) and non-play characters (NPCs), Burgess and Jones reveal previously unrecognised dynamics of character and story design that contribute significantly to overcoming industry misconceptions and concerns about the success of games that feature women as the protagonist.

It is important to remember that while all brands are a type of persona, not all personas are brands. Tomkinson and Elliot complicate this in a critical examination of a brand that contributes to what they call the 'contemporary gamer persona'. The authors investigate the assemblage of the 'G Fuel' energy drink brand and its associated persona that emerges from the complex arrangement of relations with high profile 'gamer' personas, including PewDiePie, the FaZe Clan, Keemstar, and NoisyButters. The article opens up new questions about the relationships between the performativity, prestige, and values connected to the professional and creative lives of specific game-focused persona performances.

In 'Playable Personas: Using Games and Play to Expand the Repertoire of Learner', Cole, Maragliano, and Werning expand the range of persona studies with a set of three case studies that analyse connections between persona, pedagogy, and play. The article explores three examples of 'learner personas' across diverse and revealing situations in which games and the making of games connect learning outcomes to performance, a key dimension of persona, which the authors consider through the lens of embodiment. Building on Werning's previous contribution to understanding the developer persona in autobiographical games, this article is a new landmark for persona studies. It recognises several important challenges for thinking about play in learning within a persona-focussed paradigm to focus on the learner and what they gain from the play experience.

Francesco Toniolo provides us with three new cartographic points to aid in mapping persona and games with a triptych of YouTube persona formations emerging from content production connected to the indie survival horror games. Toniolo explores the close and reciprocal relationship between prominent YouTubers and their highly affective performances. The article examines the genre of games that rapidly evolved due to the attention that content creators helped generate. The article first considers the rise of 'Let's Play' content on the YouTube platform before diving into the history of animated fanvids that remix characters from within the indie survival horror game genre and the related YouTuber content. Finally, Toniolo connects the survival horror play experience to content provided by a more opaque YouTuber persona who shares disturbing, off-putting, and 'creepy' contemporary folklore through text, images, audio and video formats known as 'creepypasta'.

Nathan Jackson's 'Understanding Memetic Media and Collective Identity through Streamer Persona on Twitch.tv' contributes to mapping streamer personas as a form of contemporary content creator whose success is intimately tied to the degree to which their audience participates in the production of content. Jackson builds on the definition of persona mentioned above with the concept of 'mimesis' to understand the negotiation and agency exhibited between the streamer persona and their collective audiences. The article explores two

cases with attention to the way memes are created, deployed, emerge, and evolve during game streaming. The result is an important contribution in the way games and persona specifically reflect broader practices emerging within internet culture.

As previously mentioned, Werning's understanding of autobiographical games and their developers' persona contributed to foundational ideas in persona studies. Building on Werning's approach, Thryn Henderson provides a new theoretical framework for examining the player's relationship to the developer of an autobiographical game and the process of meaning-making from the play experience. Henderson proposes and tests three perspectives of an author-player persona which he describes as a shared presence in autobiographical game spaces. In a close reading of Alex Camilleri's game *Memoir En Code: Reissue*, Henderson reveals the difference in meaning-making between three 'player positions' when viewed through the protagonist, protagonist-proxy, and the witness perspectives.

In the final contribution to this edition, Chris Comerford presents new research into the ways games fill crucial voids in our everyday lives during times of crisis. Comerford shares insights into the types of gaming personas that players reported performing through the initial Covid-19 pandemic lockdown of 2020 by embracing the life-simulator game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*. Comerford's survey results help us understand the modes in which players integrate game roles into the public presentation of themselves both in the game and via social media as game fans. This article serves as an important reminder of the benefits of routine gameplay experiences conducive to personal and social stability when otherwise ordinary life becomes disrupted.

This issue represents a remarkable achievement for persona studies and its contributors, demonstrating its truly multi- and inter-disciplinary potential and effectiveness. It offers a series of key innovations for game studies and clearly reveals the potential of the theory and methodological tools that persona studies offer as an intersectional research trajectory. The issue comes at an important stage for persona studies as we look to the future in 2021, both in the immediate but also longer-term direction that will be interrogated as part of the upcoming international persona studies conference. We invite you to review the CFP on the journal website and imagine how you might contribute to the field as we seek to ensure that persona studies is a space for new voices, especially emerging academics, and an area of study that promotes change, diversity, and inclusive scholarship.

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