

# PERSONA IN MMO GAMES: CONSTRUCTING AN IDENTITY THROUGH COMPLEX PLAYER/CHARACTER RELATIONSHIPS

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## ABSTRACT

*Studies of online interaction involving identity can be divided into two distinct categories. On the one hand, there is the study of the players, which often asks questions of a psychological or economic nature. On the other hand, there is the study of characters, which looks at issues of language or culture, and critical theory topics such as gender, class, and race online. While these two approaches have created a field of digital games research that provides many valuable resources and research projects, the separation between these topics is also limiting due to the complex and intertwined nature of online and offline interaction in the modern age.*

*This paper presents a new definition of persona as an additional methodological concept that can be used to observe interaction in the online world, particularly as it applies to the presentation of an identity to others. This construct serves as a joint identity of character and player, combining these otherwise separate topics to allow for a greater depth of understanding of the actions and reasoning behind the characters and players of digital games. It is also applicable to other online contexts, such as social networking, livestreaming, and forum use.*

## KEY WORDS

Identity; Online Interaction; Methodology; Qualitative Research; Digital Games

## INTRODUCTION

The digital realm of interaction is a quickly growing and significant part of our lives. It is also becoming an increasingly important target for research and theoretical debate. One area of research that is of particular interest to researchers is online gaming identity practices. Many, if not most, of these research projects can quickly be divided into two categories. First, there is the study of the player behind the screen. These studies tend to ask their participants questions regarding their motivations and personality characteristics (Barnett & Coulson 2010; Chang & Zhang 2008; Yee 2006), personal histories and psychologies (Ducheneaut & Moore 2005; Williams et al. 2011), and the economic impacts of their online experiences (Lehdonvirta & Ernkvist 2011). The second area of research is typically focused on the character inside a virtual social context. These types of studies focus specifically on social interaction and language online (Moore, Ducheneaut & Nickell 2006; Paul 2010), culture in online groups (Boellstorff 2008; Milik & Webber 2016; Taylor 2006), and some particular branches of critical theory, such as gender and race (Bergstrom 2012; Grundy 2008; Kerr 2003; Nakamura 2009). It is uncommon,

however, for these different social realms to be viewed simultaneously. One such attempt was to mesh large quantitative datasets with ethnographic data (Ducheneaut et al. 2010). However, the vast collection of data made analysis at the final stage very disorienting. There are limits to any collection of data. For example, there are only so many different factors that can be included in a data set, and collecting an entire set of data for a character and another for a player may end up being prohibitive in terms of time and resources.

This paper offers a solution in the form of a methodological paradigm: persona. This methodological model has been crafted to allow for a relative amount of organisation and generalisability for studies pursuing future research online. Persona as a tool allows for the analysis of the region of social interaction that lies between the character and the player, but includes the actions of both. This construct serves the purpose of unifying an otherwise complex relationship that includes varying degrees of anonymity and permanence. In order to accomplish this, this paper is arranged in three parts. First, it looks at the different types of character-based interactions that an individual may encounter in a virtual world. Of particular interest are the complex relationships generated when character accounts are shared, or when a single player uses multiple characters to engage with the game world. In the second part, the ways in which a player engages with a digital realm will be observed. Rather than focus only on interactions that occur through an avatar, it will be shown that many players engage with others through multiple interactional tools, including forums, social media, and even through in-person meetups. After showing the potential problems that stem from the current dynamic, the final section introduces persona as an interactional tool and offers some ways of understanding how persona can be used as a device to generate better and more valuable data in future research projects on online life.

This paper is grounded in the meeting space between several different disciplines. The theoretical grounding for this project lies in between the fields of social psychology—namely the focus on Identity Theory by researchers such as Burke and Stets (2009)—and the discipline of sociology—specifically, the work on Dramaturgy by Erving Goffman (1959). The examples used in this paper are based on a five-year study (2011-2016) of large Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) games (namely *World of Warcraft* (2003) and *EVE Online* (2001)). This study involved participant observation, with the researcher involved as a player and a member of several self-described “hardcore” organisations via a character named Daisarn (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).



Figure 1. Daisarn in World of Warcraft



Figure 2. Daisarn in EVE Online

Hardcore play is defined by Pargman and Jakobsson (2008) as playing competitively and spending at least twenty hours a week in-game. Data was collected through digital ethnography

(Boellstorff et al. 2012), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967), and autoethnography. The names of participants have been anonymised to comply with ethical requirements.

Erving Goffman's (1959, 1974) works have been used in many different research projects, particularly those involving ethnographic research methods (Milik 2015). This project uses the conceptual framework of dramaturgy, specifically the purposeful presentation of the self, which Goffman refers to as impression management (1959, p. 208). Using this perspective, the individual is responsible for generating and maintaining a social self that they relay to others. Goffman describes the active "selves" that are displayed based on the active region, which is the social context of a particular interaction (p. 106). The Front Stage, for instance, is a region that is visible to the largest audiences and therefore is the most deliberately crafted to influence the viewer. For instance, a doctor will include artifacts in their office that display medical competence to calm and reassure patients. Artifacts such as diplomas, awards, and medical textbooks are commonly used as context in the Front Stage. Alternatively, the Back Stage is the place where a different version of the self is allowed to be visible. Customer service staff taking lunch in a break room, for instance, are free to speak to each other in a different way to the type of speech they would use when out on the floor within earshot of customers.

For the purposes of looking at interaction between individuals in an online setting, such as *EVE Online* or *World of Warcraft*, these two 'stages' fit neatly into the different simultaneous experiences of a digital actor. On the one hand, there is the character—a Front Stage construct wherein identity is actively crafted so that it can be shared with others. The character can potentially change its appearance, pick up different conversational affects (such as trying to speak more like a leader) (Milik 2015), and even change entire identities through mechanisms in the game world (such as changing weapons to use a completely different set of attacks in *Guild Wars 2*). This malleability is what differentiates the character from an avatar in a digital game. Once crafted, an avatar retains its core identifying features, such as race, sex, name, and so forth. The character, on the other hand, is a social construct that can, for instance, serve as mesh between different game servers. At the same time, however, the individual is also the player—a person who is sitting in a chair at a desk or on a couch, looking at a screen and executing certain actions and behaviours that may or may not be directly connected to the digital interaction. The actions conducted by this aspect of the self correlate with the concept of the Back Stage: a situation where an individual presents a less crafted version of the social self (Goffman 1959, p. 108). While the two stages, Front and Back, cover much of the research that is done on interaction and identity online, it is the purpose of this project to present a "Meta-Stage", wherein the persona is shown to be the active social entity, socially encompassing the actions of both a character and a player.

The concept of persona used for this project is that of a heuristic that allows for faster communication. It can, for instance, offer a quick method of encompassing multiple characters into a single social actor, allowing for social interaction to occur swiftly and meaningfully. This concept takes the persona developed by researchers such as P. David Marshall (2010, 2014) and directs the focus towards interaction rather than presentation. The use of persona in this paper refers to multiple facets (Moore et al. 2017) that create complex social interactions, which in turn gives the concept analytical use (Marshall & Barbour 2015). In particular, persona can be crafted into a methodological tool, as has been done by Marshall and Barbour (2015), but instead of focusing on presentation of a public self, the approach here concentrates on the interactions that occur through different forms of digital media.

Goffman discusses the presentation of the self and the presentation of identity to others (1959, p. 19). For the purposes of this paper, the concept of identity is theorised in the terms

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discussed by Burke and Stets (2009). Identity theory, in their perspective, describes an individual as a whole series of different identities (such as daughter, mother, spouse, professor, gardener, sister, and so on). All of these identities have some amount of value to an individual, but they will be ranked, with some identities coming to the fore while others recede to the background. The ranking will change based on the situation, so the individual may primarily present a mother when speaking to a child, but a professor when speaking to a student. Using this paradigm, the individual is not linked to a singular identity (a unified self), but instead is tied to a selection process through which their identities are defined and used in socially significant ways (Carter & Fuller 2016). This perspective on identity meshes well with the theoretical framework of dramaturgy. It helps to address a criticism aimed at Goffmanian sociology, which asks where do these roles come from (Denzin 2003)? At the same time, it preserves the different forms of presentation (the Front and Back Stages), which can be intrinsically linked to the different identities that come to the fore in an interaction. These stages can be used to display which identities are important to the individual in any given situation. Lastly, Burke and Stets' (2009) non-unified concept of identity shows how Goffmanian analysis applies to a new age of social media and digital communication (Bullingham & Vasconcelos 2013; Hogan 2010).

### **THE CHARACTER AS DRAMATURGICAL FRONT**

The use of an avatar—through which an individual experiences and presents social interaction in an online game—is standard for most MMO gaming experiences, from early text-based Multi User Dungeon (MUD) games, to *Ultima Online*, to *World of Warcraft* used in this research. Serving as the focal point of the in-game camera, as well as the source of action and interaction between the player and the game world, the avatar is often considered the embodied self—the character—of the player. In fact, embodiment is an important part of the game design process, particularly in single player games where emotional investment is important, such as in Telltale's *The Walking Dead* series (Taylor, Kampe & Bell 2015). In the context of a MMO game, embodiment can be the entire point for some participants as well. Role Playing (RP) servers on *World of Warcraft* (WoW) are known for enticing players who dedicate much of their time and energy in-game into crafting their character and immersing themselves within the game world (Taylor 2002). The significance of the connection between the individual behind the screen and the character that is presented in-game can be seen in the difficulty individuals have in choosing a character name. The name is a central point of initial presentation of identity, and many players admit spending a long time finding the right name for their character (Hagstrom 2008). This problem demonstrates the difference between interacting through an avatar and having a character. Players who change servers often in WoW, for instance, often keep the name, even when they change classes or races on new servers (servers refer to the sub-region within a game that allow characters to interact. Players on different servers would not be able to meet or communicate in-game).

The role of the character in representing the qualities of the player behind the screen is important to other players inside the game. Following the introduction of “garrisons” in WoW, where individual players have access to in-game spaces that exclude others from being able to interact with the character inside, many players expressed disappointment about not being able to “show off” their accomplishments to others in the game. As one player stated, “I have all these transmogs [visual costumes for the character] and mounts, but with garrisons there is never any social contact or ability to share them with others”. With this connection between player and avatar being so clearly defined in these examples, it makes sense that others would see this relationship as simple. The idea that a single player accesses a personal computer, activates a

single account with a single character, and engages with the game and others through a single avatar is often incorrect. In practice, the actual form of play tends to take a vastly different route (especially in MMO games), and there are far more complex relationships between player and character. Even in the case of a player using only a single character for the majority of their play (in an MMO this is known as a “main” character), there are often incentives to use other characters (known as “alts”) as a means of creating additional value for the main. These alts are usually created with a particular purpose in mind. For instance, WoW players will experience limited inventory space and have a “bank alt” or an “AH (Auction house) alt” for economic exchange. Similarly, *EVE Online* players will have “industrial alts” or “marketing alts” for the same purpose (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Character Selection in EVE Online with multiple active characters

These alts can often be identified through a lack of concern for the naming structure that is so important for the main. Alts will often have names connected to the main, such as the character “Terris” using “Terrisbank”, or “Milo” using “Milothree” or “Milofour”. When directly placing Auction House prices to beat out a competitor that they want to keep as friends, players will often use names meant for complete anonymity, such as “Homemade” or “Buyme”.

In dramaturgical terms, a player interacting in this way with others will often communicate as their main characters, even when actively playing the game with an “alt” character. In one example, a player being asked to participate in an event responds “I can go. Let me switch. I’ll need a summon, I’m stuck in SW [Stormwind, a city]”. When the player says “I” here they are referring to their main character, demonstrating that playing on the alt is not a socially relevant aspect of the interaction. The primary character is the persona, regardless of the avatar or embodied entity that exists within the game world. Therefore, to only observe active characters as the focus of research, as is customary in linguistic approaches or studies of power relations, may lead to incomplete data and ignores the complex relationship an individual may have with their alt and main characters.

The example of character/player interaction above is not the only way that gameplay is experienced in groups that consider themselves “hardcore”. For instance, it is very common to be required to play multiple characters which have the same level of commitment as a main character. In WoW, guilds may require a player to choose between different characters to maximise the team’s chances of success in a particular encounter. This means that each of those characters must be at a level of maximal performance, the equivalent of having two or three main characters. In *EVE Online*, many players will use multiple characters and “multi-botting”

(using multiple game clients simultaneously to have multiple characters active, often via automated systems for ease of use) as a means of protecting trade routes, bringing numbers to a fight, or otherwise maximising profit from economic projects. One player explains that during a fight with his main character, “I need money though, so I have a miner [alt] on right now to buy my PLEX [in-game resource used to buy game time]”. Multi-botting also exists in WoW, where one player explains:

We managed to kill him [an in-game boss]. Just the two of us with six characters and you know... That was one of my more favorite accomplishments just because of what it took to do that with just the two of us. It was not easy at all. But you know, again, we still have toys and it still makes me smile after the fact.

The use of multi-botting creates a different relationship between player and character. Rather than being represented by an avatar, the individual is instead represented by a series of actions performed by a number of avatars.

One final limitation of character-based study is the ability for multiple people to use the same character in the game through account sharing. While this is against the Terms of Service (ToS) of most games, it can still occur. The most common example is when a family member takes control of a character, either as a favour (bringing a character to a guild event when a spouse is running late) or just to share the gaming experience with a child. This is an important aspect of communication in the game, and often requires clarification when contacted by other players. One player responds to a query by saying “Hey, this isn’t Sunny. I’m her husband, just doing dailies. Want me to relay a message?” In terms of reflective action, such a response makes it clear to the other players that the words and actions of the character do not necessarily reflect that of the main user of that character. However, a character may receive social sanctions due to the action of the temporary user, without the player having performed the sanctionable offence. This can have a particular impact when the loss of control of a character comes as a result of an outside event, such as the character being hacked. In that case, friends and guild mates may attempt to contact the player outside of the game. In one shared e-mail, one player tells another: “Hey, I think you’ve been hacked. Saw your account logging on all of your characters for a few minutes and not responding to any messages. I sent a report to Blizzard but you should check and report it too”. The fact that there can be temporary disconnects between the character and the social actor that is supposed to be responsible for his or her actions shows that there are more complex interactions in the game world than are sometimes studied.

From a dramaturgical perspective, it is important to note players will attempt to hide aspects of their offline identity when interacting with an online character. In presenting the character as a Front, certain stigmatised aspects of the self may act as hindrances to accomplishing goals in the game. In MMO games, where the average age of a player tends to be higher, at 27 years old for WoW (Yee 2006) and at 31 years old for *EVE Online* (CCP Quant 2014), being a very young player can be viewed as a negative that may limit the options the character experiences. To navigate their social world, players will come up with techniques to avoid that stigma. As one participant explains,

I’m in college now, but started raiding at fifteen. Back then I knew I’d get kicked if I ever spoke up in chat, so I stayed quiet. If I had to talk I totally did that low voice thing [deepening of voice] ‘Hey guys’ [Laughs].

When looking at the character as a dramaturgical Front Stage, it makes sense that the individual will attempt to maximise impression management. They will also try to ensure that stigmatising

factors, such as age, don't impact the character in-game as they might if the player was fully exposed to the virtual world.

Gender also comes into play in the complex interactions between player and character. While it is perfectly acceptable for a male to play a female character in the game, there is a social expectation that they will readily reveal this information in social interaction. If this expectation is broken it can be very disorienting for the others in the interaction. In one case, a male player played a female character, Jules. Due to the lack of voice communications in the early years of WoW, this player never revealed himself as male. Jules had many friendships and relationships in the game, but always through the female character. It was only after voice chats became mandatory for play that Jules had to explain that he was male. Many of Jules' friends expressed discomfort with being deceived, with one stating that "My trust in Jules was based on a falsehood". The reaction was so strong that it wasn't long before Jules left the server to join a new one under a different name, and to start new relationships within the game. Jules as a player became defined by the features and actions of Jules the character. This indicates that the interaction between character and player is two-way. The persona here, as Meta-Stage, incorporates both the character and the player, but also impacts the core identities and social meanings of both. While the player has a central role in defining the aspects and traits of the character, the character can also greatly influence how the player is perceived by others.

## THE PLAYER AS DRAMATURGICAL BACKGROUND

The common perception amongst players, media agencies such as gaming journals and blogs (Matticus 2009), and researchers (Kerr 2003) is that the many entanglements and relationships between an individual's actions within and outside of a game can be considered independent of each other. Players in particular argue that, even when embodiment is a goal in a game, they will not consider themselves as actually in the game world. A player of *Battlefield 4*, for instance, explains that "I'm okay with shooting people in the game because I know I'll never actually shoot someone in real life". This person is treating their identity as separate from their actions because they see the virtual experience as being separated from their offline self. This mindset also helps to explain "griefing", which is a form of trolling behaviour in MMO games. The ability to separate the player's identity from a character's actions can be very important; in the words of one WoW player, "I wanted to live something as different from my real life as possible, that's why I'm horde [an in-game player faction], I wanted to be the bad guy". The player prevents cognitive dissonance by establishing that their player-self is a good person, even if their character-self is "evil".

Identity theory argues, however, that regardless of how many identities we may have active as social beings, there is still seep-through between different identities, as they always present themselves in varying levels in an interaction. Even when an action may only happen in the virtual world, its consequences can impact the individual in the offline world as well. One way in which this can occur is by realising that all virtual world interactions happen through the services of a company. In the case of *League of Legends* (LoL) the company, Riot Games, has had to monitor player behaviour extensively after the reputation of the game was damaged by online players' "toxic" behaviour. If a player is considered sufficiently toxic, it is possible for them to be permanently banned from participating in the game in any way (Mamiit 2016). The consequences of online behaviour for the offline person show that the attempt to separate the player from the character is impossible and therefore problematic for research.

The qualities of the character will also shape the reactions a player experiences offline in both subtle and direct ways. In one famous example, angry players targeted a researcher who

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studied reactions to grieving behaviour online by acting inappropriately on a public server using a character named Twixt. After the release of his findings (Myers 2008) upset players attempted to damage his reputation by sending complaints and demands for action to the university where he worked. While anonymity is a large part of many online social networks and online games, continued anonymity is no longer a guarantee. In a world of security breaches and doxing attacks (deliberate leaking of identifying information online), there are many challenges to anonymity that may affect an individual in both the online and offline worlds.

What is it that defines a player, then? As much as the character is a social construct created by an individual through a game client, so too is the player a social construct. The identity features that are used in the player's case, however, come from the offline-world context the individual experiences. The player, while interacting online, is not a professor, or a researcher, or a farmer, or a plumber. Instead, they are an individual who projects certain identity features through language and behaviour: the dramaturgical process of impression management. In this dramaturgical understanding, the player is just another aspect of the character's identity while online, and the character is a temporary identity for the player (as seen in the above example in *Battlefield 4*). In an interaction, then, the character and player occupy the same social space—the persona—and a researcher needs to account for both aspects of the individual to get the highest quality data and results from their work.

At the intersection of the player and character is the dramaturgical concept of Back Stage interaction, and in particular the ability to be a member of a team (or group) and be “in the know” (Goffman 1959, p. 83). As the relationships created in an online setting, which are often based on anonymity, gradually become intimate, more player identity features (i.e. motherhood, employment, abuse history) will become part of the character-identity conveyed to their online friends. As more of the player leaks into the character's interactions, the character becomes a social actor with a real person behind them.

The meshing of character and player can be seen in the popularity of real-world get-togethers for online groups and games. In the *EVE Online* Alliance TEST, the community put together a yearly “TESTival” to bring their membership together. These types of events have become particularly popular with game companies that design large online games. Blizzard, for instance, hosts Blizzcon, which was originally meant for WoW players but has expanded to the whole game portfolio of the company. CCP Games (the makers of *EVE Online*) similarly have a FanFest, where they bring players together in Iceland for events based around their game characters. The continued popularity of these types of events shows that online relationships are complex. Individuals not only accept but even seek out a meshing of social information between their online self and their identities in the physical world.

Players are not surprised by the influence that feedback mechanisms from online interaction can have on the player in the offline world. In fact, seeking a means of bettering oneself is used by several players as a reason for their continued participation within a game world. In the words of one self-described shy person, he was “always afraid of going out and talking to people. I wanted to start somewhere where no one would see me, to get more comfortable talking to them. That was years ago. I think the game has really helped me in getting this job and just making friends in general”. Another person, whose first language was not English, said a significant reason that he played the game was to work on his language skills. He explains that “It's hard to talk in person, people talk so fast. It's much easier to talk to people on here”. The connections that these individuals create between the interactions performed by a character online and the qualities of themselves as a player behind the screen demonstrates that they have a good sense of how these worlds are intertwined in their lives. For someone

researching or observing these players, it becomes necessary to bring in both of these aspects of the self to properly understand players' actions. Social actions and cultures are impossible to study without putting these together, and with the rise of virtual worlds that contain a sense of permanence, there is increased need for these types of studies. The concept of persona, then, is a tool that allows for the study of the individual as well as the relationship between the online character and the offline player, all within a singular social concept.

### **THE PERSONA AS META-STAGE OF DRAMATURGICAL IDENTITY**

Given these descriptions of many potential problems and pitfalls concerning researching individuals in the virtual world, the concept of persona becomes a potential discussion point for the further development of social scientists' research into individuals and groups online. Persona is a social front, in the dramaturgical sense, based upon an individual's accessible features. Rather than being an avatar with their actions wholly online, or a "real" person walking around in the "real world," a persona is a construct that assists the individual to create consistent communications with others. The persona is easy to see in action in many different situations. The CEO at a press conference needs to present a persona that simultaneously encapsulates both himself and the spirit of his entire company. Similarly, Pewdiepie on YouTube is not Felix Kjellberg. Felix may show up at a TV interview and adopt a Pewdiepie persona, but in the same interview a viewer may notice that he slips from that persona back to a Felix self, depending on the question being asked. The reason for this is that the persona provides a social actor with relative consistency for interaction that isn't inherently based on qualities of the self, but rather on adopted qualities in other social constructions. For the digital citizen, then, the persona can incorporate aspects from different social networks and digital games, and put them all together into an actor who can interact with others successfully.

To connect more neatly with the concepts of character and player, I will continue to focus on the digital gamer, but it is clear that research into other online locales, such as social networks and forums, could also use the concept. In an MMO game, it can be helpful to see how naming conventions work for an individual in the game. While each of a players' characters will have a unique name (as mandated by the structure of the game), attempting to know multiple names for every group member is difficult. As such, players become known by a singular name and referred to as such regardless of which character is active at the time. In my own history, for instance, I would respond to the name "Dai" regardless of which of my characters were active at the time, whether it was "Astellus", "Daisarn", "Gahyris", or "Tempname". This is a common and taken-for-granted part of communicating in these games, with many players adopting naming conventions to make the process easier (starting all their characters' names with the same three letters, for instance). These persona-based naming systems are very stable as well. As an example, there was a player named Elise who played a mage in WoW for the first year of play. After that year, however, Elise was no longer used, and the player was more active as a priest named Leylein. The friends that she made in the first year, however, continued to refer to her as Elise ten years later, even though any new friends would know her as Leylein. The durability of this name would create difficulty if the study only observed the character, given that the names changed but the accepted persona and name remained the same.

There are also official means of collecting persona-based information that have been constructed by games developers running MMO games. Blizzard, for instance, has converted their Battle.net system to be a social communication tool as well as a games client. Rather than linking their system to a character, however, Blizzard connects each account to a singular Battle.net account. As such, it is possible to see that "Leylein1568 has come online". This account name will bring together different characters under a shared identity, which can become a

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short-hand version of a persona. In *EVE Online*, there is a similar resource in the EVE Application Program Interface (API). A group leader will often request the API from all applicants, allowing them to see the history of every character that is on an account, rather than rely on just the history of the particular character applying.

While there are specific names that are primarily used to call attention to a persona, most players are happy to respond to any of the names that are linked to their particular persona. The social expectations for each of them should be similar, due to them being linked in the same way. There are, however, exceptions. In *EVE Online*, for instance, spying is a very important part of organisational warfare. As such, many players have alts that are used to spy. These players attempt to keep their persona hidden when acting on these particular spy characters, but the durability of the persona may still affect them. The largest groups will have counterintelligence teams, who will study interactions performed by questionable characters, connecting them to public forum posts and discussions by a known persona to uncover a mole or an enemy operative. This also happens in *WoW* sometimes, with some players attempting to hide alts from others because they worry that they are not as proficient with using them. In order to preserve the reputation of their persona, they will refuse to acknowledge a character that would not perform to the same level.

These examples, and the work that players will put into protecting their persona, demonstrate that this concept helps to account for a greater permanence in online interactions than are often accepted in research projects. While the character is assumed to be relatively mobile (a player can drop a character from their identity by merely logging off, or deleting the character), a persona continues to exist beyond that character's interactions. Therefore, as online systems of communication and interaction continue to grow more complex, the different concepts that we use to observe them need to encapsulate the greater attention and energy that individuals will put into their virtual life.

In order to bring the persona into dramaturgical focus, it helps to differentiate it from the character as Front Stage and player as Back Stage. Goffman explains that these stages are socio-psychological constructs that define the scope of interaction. In *Frame analysis: an essay on the organization of experience* (1974), he explains that social actors adopt different roles to ensure the smooth flow of interaction. The player is active in out-of-game conversations and interactions. For example, if one was to call a guild mate to remind them of an in-game event, it would be awkward to greet them using their character name. Therefore, in such a scenario, the player is the active social front. The character is a useful tool for immediate interactions, such as meeting another player's avatar in combat or attempting to make a purchase at a public part of an in-game town. It is understood that players typically have more than one character (Carter, Gibbs & Arnold 2012). If we only observe character-based interactions then only these temporary and fleeting interactions would be the result. Instead, a player will expect that a person will, in some ways, act consistently across different characters and over a series of connected interactions. If one character acts in a certain way, then it would make sense that other characters connected to them through a persona will act similarly. This is, after all, the basis of a persona (Baden et al. 2009). Persona serves as a heuristic to allow for quicker understandings between interactants, and for easier categorisation of others. For the researcher, then, it makes sense to seek out the basis of this heuristic and to use it much as the player does: to increase the understanding of social interactions.

## CONCLUSION

Studies of character and player have managed to get sufficiently interesting and important findings so far without persona. However, there are still many research opportunities enabled by using a more expansive paradigm of the digital social actor. Whenever an individual enters an online world, they establish another layer of personal identity. Cumulatively, these layers of persona create a measure of permanence online that can remain partially separate from the offline self. The individual can participate with others using their character, but still have a sense that interactions and relationships will be longer-term and more meaningful. These concepts are tied to a greater sense of connection to their character and to the game. As we become more invested in our online social networks and digital games, persona will become an increasingly valuable tool to analyse interaction in the modern era.

Without the concept of persona, observations of online interaction can be unnecessarily confusing. The character is just too malleable, and the player is considered too much of a permanent entity who spends most of their time offline. In adopting persona, then, the social action researcher can analyse online actions without needing to delve into the minds of actors offline. At the same time, by looking at the persona as a tent within which multiple characters exist, the researcher is able to understand more about players, online organisations, and cultures that can grow out of online interactions. After all, all interactionists should wish to move away from analysing people's rationales after-the-fact and instead observe actions *in situ*. As Jeff Coulter (1999, p. 179) stated: "There is nothing in the head of interest to us but brains".

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