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Aspects of Identification in Computer Gaming

Abstract: The text relates computer gaming to the social psychology of identity, focusing the notion that identity construction has a reflected character not only in virtual reality but also in real life. This gives a tight correspondence between the two, though the screen construction of identity goes on in greater independence of real other persons. Gaming has the trait that it “contracts”, draws together several events at one point in space and time. This effectuates that two extremes of identification, functional and existential identification are held together tightly in gaming which gives a high emotional intensity to it. This is true also of the element of meaning creation in gaming as well as the processes of anticipatory identification that are found in it.

The analysis is made based of a theory of “stages in the act”.

Key concepts: Computer gaming, identity construction, spontaneous/reflected action, function/existential identification, anticipatory identification, stages in the act

Introduction; on identity and social psychology

This paper is about the influence of computer gaming on personal or individual identity and on motivation for it. The conceptual frame of reference is derived from pragmatist social psychology, especially the version i G. H. Meads thought. Here we find that identity presupposes consciousness. This in turn presupposes *action* in general and *social* action in particular. In meadian theory this is in effect the same as language, or significant symbols, as Mead coined his concept. In order for the infant Andrew to develop a perception and a following conception of his own identity it is presupposed that Andrew is active against other human beings, and that these latter respond to his action. If this happens, Andrew can indirectly notice that there is an object, against which Others' responses are directed. This object is the basis for his identity. It is given to him indirectly by Others' reactions to his behaviour. It is important to notice that Andrews own actions are not at all so important for his construction of identity, that Others' responses to them are.

To make the thing clear by a simple, somewhat rude, analogy: Andrew can not experience his own identity by turning his eyes into his head trying to look into his own brain. Nothing is there to see, partly because there is probably an overwhelming pain, but mainly because there is no light for his eyes. The light for his eyes is like the "interface" that exists between him and the Other. This "interface" functions to carry over Others' responses to Andrews acts into his experience, so that he can discover his own action on a distance, so to speak. So the main point is that among all events in the world, your own action is the most impossible to discover, because you are always in the middle of it, and thus you need somebody else to mediate it for you. This is basic in meadian social psychology, but there is no place here to develop the theory; I use it as a presupposition.

Personal identity is the result of social action, from the time you spend as a newborn infant until you die from old age. Other people give you the capacity to discover your identity, as well as the form and content you discover it in. Your own main contribution is, apart from your own spontaneous action, the growing capacity to distinguish the different characteristics of it and subsequently to prefer some of these and to reject others. And this capacity is also in close connection with your social life, because it emerges as a result of the history of your own life, where some events are pleasant, some not, dependent on the evaluations of your "significant others".

Most of what I have said is in accord with general social psychology about such phenomena as identity development, self evaluation, self image, and such processes. But it is seldom made clear the first and general position I have made: that there is no possibility at all to develop a Self and identity without the Other. That your identity is deeply *affected* by Others is recognized, but not that it is *generated* by them.

Computer gaming has a relation to identity that is sometimes very close. Sherry Turkles' analysis is a modern classic on this point, and many researchers follow her. Now, where does all this lead us when talking about computer gaming and its influences on identity? I have tried to trace some components in this story, e.g. by reading Turkle, psychoanalyst, within a social psychologists perspective (Berg 2006, 2007), and now I want to go further with this endeavour. The first thing I want to do is to use the meadian analysis of the concept of "act" to place the act of computer gaming in this frame.

Stages in the act; their relation to identification and computer games

Mead suggests four stages of any ordinary human act: the impulse and perception stages, the manipulative stage and finally the consummating stage. I suggest that it is possible to put these in relation to identification and to computer gaming. It is possible to talk of primitive or unreflective identification, in the first stages of an act where you have to adjust your action to another being in a fast bypassing way, and *elaborated* identification where it is about the consummating stage.

The first uncomplicated version of identification can be illustrated by the act of not treading on your partners feet when dancing. In so far as you can anticipate the movements of your partner, you can avoid his/her feet, and this is a primitive way of identifying yourself with your partner. Your correct anticipation of his/her movements *is* in fact a way of identification to the extent that you perform implicitly his/her movements before you perform your own. I need only to remind the reader of the game Counter Strike, to show a perfect version of this identification process in the computer game world. This identification is *elementary, primitive* or *functional* (in so far as you perform the same functions implicitly as your partner performs explicitly. It is also pre reflective in so far as you do not think consciously on the question whether you want to perform the act implicitly or not; you just do it, without thinking, in much the same way as you put one foot before the other when walking.

The elaborated version of identification can also be called *reflective, advanced, sophisticated or existential* identification. This can be illustrated by most of the sorts of game that Turkle talks about, and about which she has performed her interviews. They are called on-line games, or with the technical term MMORPG.s. We can also call this identification *mediated* from more primitive stages to more developed, (for example from the impulse stage to the consummated). It is mediated because it is made to pass from the impulsive stage to through the complicated stages where the objects are manipulated to the consummating stages where you can consider and evaluate your play as for example good or bad, thrilling or boring. The concept of manipulation is used by Mead to indicate the various aspects of handling the object. A simple example would perhaps be that before you can consume your sandwich, you have to prepare it (manipulate), and when it is eaten up, you can evaluate it in aesthetic terms (consummating stage).

An interview I made with an adult gamer of Counter Strike, Brian, illustrates this neatly. The man tells me that much goes on during the long manipulative stage, the handling of the imaginary gun. Afterwards there is a natural consequence of chatting on the screen with your partner, settling the evaluations of how the play was. This is the consummating stage of the game.

It is to be observed that this notion of stages of the act can be applied to very short sequences, for example one single shot in the CS, or to the whole game, from agreeing with your playmates that you are going to have an hour of gaming, to the evaluation of the session and agreeing on when and where to meet next time.

It is an especially interesting point in this interview that the man reports a capacity to have short chatting comments on the game even when it is going on. It is as if the two of them keep a dialogic diary while the session runs. This is possible in spite of the fact that the game is dependent on fast speed. Probably long and continuous training gives this effect of doing one thing while commenting the same thing verbally. The same can happen while driving a car, for example.

If we carry this back to the theory of stages in the act, we then make the important observation that an individual can be present in different stages of the act at the same time, so to speak. While manipulating during the act, you can at the same time evaluate it, and perhaps you can remember which impulses you had before the act, driving you to indulge in it. This is the essence of reflection: The capacity to keep an act real and living while it is passing on into the future. This is an aspect of the theory that should be worked out in detail; the theory of

stages in the act indicates an important aspect of human intelligence: the capacity to keep different parts of an act actual and living instead of “dropping them dead” one after another.

Expressed in Meads own words, which were never developed to their full potential: Sociality is the capacity to be at two places or to be two persons or give two responses *at the same time* (Mead 1981) or expressed with another concept: *anticipating* what the other person will do, and when, is sociality in its elementary form. This is essential in a game like CS. It is essential, to be sure, in chess also, but there is a special feature that is striking and evident in CS: the speed at which this must be done.

Now for a conclusion: This sort of anticipation can be made very fast. It includes a functional, primitive or elementary and bodily identification with the other. This is found even on lower levels of psychic development than the human: The dogs’ fight (one of Meads favourite examples for illustrating what he calls a “conversation with gestures”). It is highly probable that the dogs’ fight includes learned responses of the sort Mead indicated, but also instinctive behaviour that can work without reflective psychic activity, like the patellar and the blinking reflexes. (For example, the dog’s withdrawing the lips and showing the teeth is an instinctive behaviour elicited by certain stimuli. Here is very little learned behaviour.) This behaviour thus is not reserved for the elaborated, reflective and existential identification that I have defined above. The latter form presumes the former, but the former does not automatically result in the latter. The former does not presume the whole chain of stages in the act. The latter does.

Identity as reaction to reflected activity.

We now must settle an essential relation between identity, act and computer gaming. If we regard this relation from my social psychological point of view the following stands out: Human action is the stuff that makes up human identity; building identity is a form of action. It is not made in vacuum, it is not made by reflecting on yourself *a priori* or before action. If Brian is to find an identity for himself, this is done in the first place by his own action, reflected through his observation of his partner’s reaction to it. In this reflective process, Brian begins building his identity, by taking up and integrating the different responses he gets from Other.

So you can never find your identity in yourself. You must reflect (on) Other’s reactions to your action, to settle in a personal identity.

The special thing happening in interacting with or through the computer, is the ways the response from this Other is structured. There are at least two principal ways for these responses to be created. The first one is that the response is structured in a standardized way that does not take Brians special personality into account; to be a gamer, you must master the computer, just as you cannot communicate with English speaking people without knowledge of the English language. The soft ware of the program gives the answer to Brian when he acts at the computer. Here is not much left for personally formed action.

The second way is that the computer with both hard ware and soft ware is there as the “medium” through which Brian interacts with his friends and partners. Here is room left for personal reaction. This is what happens in elementary form in CS, and the same thing is much more sophisticated in on-line role games.

The point to keep in mind now is that what happens on the screen is no trifle. It is solid identity construction that is taking place, more solid as Brian is more and more emotionally engaged in the game, and working both in relation to the hard and soft ware and the on-line friends. Only by understanding the thing in these psychological terms can we understand some of the more difficult reactions reported in the field. To take one example (reported in

news program Rapport, autumn 2006): A teenage boy spends too much time with the computer. His mother gives him an ultimatum. The boy reacts by taking his computer with him and moving to a friend of his in order to keep spending at least 10 - 12 hours a day at the screen. The thing is a big problem in the family, and it gives considerable strain both for the boy and the mother, affecting the entire life process in a bad way for both. This would probably not happen if the computer game were just simple entertainment for the boy. (According to the mother, no other problems between the two were prevalent.)

In a nutshell: The boy gets an identity reinforced, which he reacts positively to as an identity for himself. Or to express the thing in a way standardized by Turkle and others: What he does not accomplish so easily in RR (real reality) he gets in VR (virtual reality). He is gaming an on-line game (World of Warcraft), and the special trait appearing here is that he is entitled to cultivate *any identity he wants*, without the Other mastering him in other ways than competing with him on the screen concerning the objectives that are immanent to that screen and the soft ware rules made by the game constructor.

Conclusion: On the screen, identity construction can go on *swiftly* and seemingly *unquestioned*. You build yourself into any Gestalt and Narrative that you want. Nobody questions your inclinations. There are no obstacles other than the standardized basic rules in the soft ware. You get your reinforcement already by the Others accepting you, in the very act of reacting on your actions on the screen.

Compare this with the jazz musician playing with his partners. He also builds his identity (as a musician). He gives an improvisation on the 12 bars theme. His success is dependent not only on his handicraft skill and his obeying the basic rules for jazz improvisation, but in very high degree on the preceding performance by himself and his partners, the attention he gets from them during his solo performance, on their indications of how he should perform, on the reactions of the audience, and many other stimuli, which he must handle in the process. There are two striking differences between the two situations:

1) the musician is much more bound by a manifold *concrete* interactions and rules. These have immediate validity and they must not be broken in the process.

2) these interactions go on in a *direct* way. You meet your partners directly here and now and you exercise eye and ear contact with them in order to come through. In effect, the success of the performance is directly dependent on these concrete interdependencies.

These two basic interaction conditions are the case in much lower degree on the screen. I put forward the hypothesis that they contribute to the great attraction that computer gaming exerts over many young persons, especially boys. My interpretation in terms of identity building, coupled to the gender difference observed in computer gaming gets evident support from the common observation that boys are inclined more to individualistic accomplishments and instrumental skills than girls do (Chodorow 1978, and many other authors). The point is that boys' tendency to independent identity building gets more reinforcement in computer gaming than in the identity building in the more female identity building in concrete relations. An interpretation in terms of Chodorow's theory thus makes the overwhelming male dominance in computer gaming more comprehensible.

There is another point to be gained also: the simple shoot-your-enemy games like CS are more of the Gestalt sort, while girls tend to play more in a way of Narrative. This was also found in play with dolls in a pilot study by Berg and Nelson (2006). This finding gives us an hypothesis: Girls should be more attracted by on-line narrative identity play than boys, who should like Gestalt gaming like CS better.

Reflective capacity and primitive/functional versus elaborated/existential identification

The preceding section was mainly devoted to the possibility of individual choice and decision and the fluency and rapidity with which this process can work. The concepts of Gestalt and Narrative were also introduced. Now let us work the argument deeper by going back to the theory of the “chain of the act” or “stages in the act”, as Mead called it. I introduced the thought that reflection is constituted by looking back on the preceding stages, when you come to the consummating stage.

Reflection, thus, is possible only when you have gone from the first stages of an act to the later ones. Or: reflection *is* part of the consummating stage of the act. This is because reflection is constituted by taking the whole act into account and evaluating it. This taking into account is the essence of reflection, and so reflection can be “operationally” defined as the capacity to grasp the whole act or most of it in one single mental representation.

It also seems that the computer gaming is an excellent example of how reflection comes about and can work. This is exactly what Brian is doing when he is commenting the play with his partner, while it is going on, and still more after the session when they both chat on the screen with each other. They are considering the game and its conditions, and evaluating it, taking the whole into account, in the process giving each other compliments or criticisms.

Here we find a further development of identification, that carries it into psychic process more than only physical anticipation of the Others’ action. When Brian is complimenting his partner he says: If I were You, I would be proud of my fastness (or whatever capacity the partner has given evidence of). Brian is putting himself in the position of the partner, and the partner in the position of himself. They are taking each others places in Brians mind, while he is commenting on the game. This is mature role-taking, in the way that Mead used the term.

This example illustrates both *primitive* and *elaborated* identification. Playing the game gives in one session hundreds or thousands of instances of fast *functional* anticipating identification, and the chatting over the session gives the elaborated *existential* identification where there is ample room for empathizing activity concerning the feelings and impressions of the game.

Emotional intensity in gaming and stages in the act

Now it is possible to point out special instants in the chain of the act where the emotional reactions take on different characteristics. Computer games give exceptionally good opportunities to observe these processes. It is easy to see that the impulsively strong aspects of emotional experience are very “hot” in games like CS. Impulsivity almost becomes inner psychic compulsion. The player gets carried away by his own impulses to get along with the game, because it demands fast action. All attention is occupied by the game, and clear signs of spontaneous emotional excitement are usual. This is easy to observe among young players; it is there already with the simple game of Super Mario on the TV-screen. This is a special case of the childish intensity in social role playing. But the same process is reported even from older players. Brian, for example, an intellectual adult young man, tells us about the impulsive and strong emotional character of his “addiction”, which he is quite aware of.

He thus shows that he has a reflective capacity to observe his own behaviour in objective and critical terms in an existential identification process from himself as intellectual to himself as a game “addict”. He is creating a clear path from the players’ first step in the stage of impulse, to the intellectual evaluator after the game. And he exerts a meta-reflective activity on top of it. So he illustrates “*in nuce*” an essential aspect of identification processes in play and game activities. He goes rapidly from the childish intensive emotional attitude in the game to the objective observer evaluating his own engagement in the game.

These processes are – as identification processes – sophisticated and difficult to analyze. I suggest that computer games constitute a virginal field for studying them. Take again the example of Brian and the CS session and apply to his activity the theory of stages in the act. In a very short span of time you walk from stages of impulse and perception over the many manipulating steps to the consummating stage with its special confirmatory social acts of recognition and identification.

The early stages of the act are spontaneous. This carries with it the consequence that they are exposed to emotional impulsivity in a higher degree than the later stages. Brian tells me about this phenomenon concerning CS where the whole thing is about following the impulses to shoot fast enough. Reflection comes later. Some other young adults that I interview concerning their engagement in on-line role games also tell me that you easily let yourself get carried away emotionally by the characters that you create for yourself in these games.

Computer gaming as “contracting” the act

We can now draw together the preceding points to understand the strong attraction that gaming exerts over some people: Gaming allows you to draw together and put in one single framework the possibility of creating a capacity to create an *identity as a whole* for yourself. You can do it *freely*, because nobody else really interferes with your gaming process in a way that is there in RR. You can do it *individually*, or you do not depend on a concrete RR person. There are so to speak “*curtains*” hanging there *between* you and the Other, so that you can play Hide and Seek with him/her. You are not left there naked with your trivial acts, but can pretend the *glamorous person* you created in your character. And you can, finally and essentially, accomplish this totality within a *special area* of life marked with sharp and *legitimate boundaries* that the RR life must not break (Huizinga 1953).

The process is in this way very similar to the role play process so often observed among small children, which Mead saw as essential in their growing into human beings with the special characteristic of creating an identity and a consciousness. I have analyzed the strong and intensive character that this role play has for children (Berg 1992, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2007, Berg and Nelson 2006) by referring to its necessity for creating an identity, and by regarding the latter as an essential *sine qua non* for every human being.

RR life seldom gives the generous allowance for people more than 5 years old to build identity in this liberal way. But computer gaming legitimizes this miracle, not only for 10 years old boys or teenagers, but for adult men (and women, if they feel like it). Computer games thus are a legitimate arena for continuing the building of VR identities that the little child does. And the strong point to put in the limelight is that, whereas RR identity building is a tiresome and prolonged process going on in very different surroundings and fragmenting conditions, the VR identity building goes on in a strictly defined and confined arena where the whole process is accomplished in a short and undisturbed passage of time, under easily systematized conditions and with very little resistance. It is done with high “compression” and “condensation”, conditions like those of a plant in the green house.

Returning again to the theory of the act, we can express the phenomenon in this way: Whether regarding the identity building as a prolonged and complicated chain of events as in WoW or as the very short event happening under just a section of a CS-game, the stages in the act can be held together in a rather systematic fashion. They can so to speak be handled by the player so that they are more or less visible for him/her during the game. There is a possibility for “calculus” and “bargaining” of the identity with Self (as in CS individually, playing with just the soft ware program) or Others, as in complicated WoW-sessions.

It is possible to define consciousness as emanating from the stage theory: Consciousness is the capacity to keep together the stages in your imagination, while the act is carried out. It is like being

able to take any point in the chain and make a photo of it, but also to know where in the complete film that the solitary Photo belongs. Or as Mead once defined the concept: Consciousness is no more complicated than to be able to anticipate your own action (Mead 1969).

This means, if we return to the computer game, that it has a special condition to bid the gamer: Like other games, this situation is markedly structured. There is a possibility to *anticipate most of the events in the game*, the thrilling thing being condensed in the fact that the only unknown factor is “who will win”. Other circumstances are well known. This is possibly one of the main reasons that gaming is a thrilling activity that fascinates so many people. It is as in roulette: You know all facts but the one that determines if you wind yourself ruined or rich. But in computer gaming (without money) the profit is not economical in the first place, it is a profit of identity.

The tension between known and unknown factors give most of the thrill to the game. Totally permeable, open and visible, this predictable situation thus is made impossible to predict or anticipate by one single factor: chance and/or the uncertainty of who is the most skilled player.

It now seems that computer games, especially of the sort CS, maximize this sort of conditions, putting them forth in a clean and logic sequence. (The WoW-sort of on-line-game has additional conditions which must be analyzed in their turn.).

Computer gaming and meaning creation

To come to the bottom of these questions, it is necessary to go to the theory of meaning, that can be traced in Mead. This will also complement the mansided and profound analysis of this subject in relation to computer gaming made by Linderoth (2004, esp. chapter 3). Meaning for Mead is a result of interaction including the Other, reacting to the action of the individual. When the individual takes up and recognizes his own act as it is perceptible in the reaction that Other gives to this former act of the individual, the phenomenon we call “meaning” results from this. I believe we can express the thing in the following fashion: the Others’ response to my action establishes a distance between this action and myself, and the result is that I can take it up and observe it as a sort of autonomous entity.

We can not go to the core of this theory here, but consider for a moment a simple example: I am walking on the pavement, thinking of a problem at my job. There is a brick in my way. I stumble and fall. My consciousness of the situation is not there before I can see the brick and draw a primitive “theory” of the brick intervening with my automatic walking, etc. The brick is as an “Other” there, forcing me to observe what I was doing unconsciously: Putting one foot before the other in what we call “walking”. Thus the various concrete *elements* of meaning are there in the situation (Mead 1969 chapter 11) but the *consciousness* of meaning is not automatically there, brought by the brick. Consciousness of meaning is exclusively brought by the fact that the action calls out in the real Other the same response that it calls out in myself (Mead 1969 chapter 11 and part II); the Others’ response to my act gives to it the (conscious) meaning that it has. This meaning constitutes my consciousness of the situation. Thus we can say that my capacity to learn creatively and consciously to avoid bricks is dependent on the Others’ taking part of my accident with the first brick. This learning is something else than the learning in Skinners rats and turtles.

Now there are two sorts of Other in the computer. When I play the game with one or more real Others, they are there as in the meadian scene just mentioned, responding to my actions on the screen, but on a distance, so to speak “behind” the screen. But there is *also* a Virtual Other as well, determining much of the meaning which is there to be found, in a way that is more “vivid” than the spoken language as medium makes meaningful contact between me and my partners possible. Thus my communication is both with the Real Others and the Virtual other (the soft ware or program). (Just imagine, as a test, what would result if there were no logic in the responses that the computer program makes. If all the programs’ responses were haphazard, even to the extent that

we could not predict if there will be a response or not, no person would in the long run be able to consider this situation as “computer gaming” within any reasonable limits of the word.)

There is an easy test of this thesis that I communicate with two different “persons”: Concerning ordinary language we never talk about it in personalizing terms. But we do of the computer and its program, because the interactive “windows” in the program are visible and readable for us as a sort of communicating partner. We say that the computer “wants” us to do something, or that it “forbids” or that it “refuses” or whatever. (Turkle 1995 gives vivid interview examples of this personalizing function.)

I suggest, in accord with the preceding section, that a significant part of the fascination in computer gaming resides in the more or less mysterious fact that the computer looks like a machine, but it reacts to your action as if it were, or as if it contains, a living person (which it in fact also does, although extremely indirectly, even if you play only with a Virtual Other). In this way the computer is the very supreme example of what the Swedish social psychologists Johan Asplund calls “social responsiveness” (swedish: social responsivitet). His own most primitive example is this one: When playing with an air dragon, the varying tension in the line that I hold in my hand, is experienced as a “response”. It is, adopting my current terminology” as if there were a “Virtual Other” up there in the paper dragon riding on the wind, an Other answering me and my wishes down there on earth.

To pull this indication further, Asplunds theory builds up an ambitious meadian logic in the concept: Social responsiveness is not only emotionally necessary to people. It is what makes human life human. Or with Mead again: Man gets involved as an infant in meaning construction. The way that this construction unconsciously comes into being – or is born – is that the human individual calls out in the Other responses that are similar (but not totally identical with) your own responses to yourself.

Taken together this argument puts forward the thesis that the computer games invite you into a world where you have two similar but different playmates, The Real Other and the Virtual Other, and that an intricate construction of meaning systems takes place between these three partners. In the mentioned games a central object for this meaning construction is the Gestalt or the Capacities of my Self, which is the living dynamic aspect of my identity (Berg 2000).

Now one of the most intricate systems of meaning that are ever constructed by human beings, is the personal identity. It is the construction of himself as a constructor of meanings in general and meanings concerning his own Self in particular, that is the core of every human individuals’ psychic endeavour in life. It is the Self as centre of a meaningful world that is the central meanings system. The Self is a spider in its net, which is ever expanding.

The computer has brought very special new conditions into this main affair of human life, that meaning construction constitutes. The main novelty might be described as the individual illusory capacity to construct new meanings indefinitely. There is really an illusion here: I can think of myself as the only constructor of meanings and my own identity, but behind this there lurks – on a distance – both Real Others, as in WoW, and there is always and inevitably a Virtual Other, whom I do not see, and who is much more permissive to me than any Real Other is. So I can feel unconstrained to build my identity in the way I choose. We can lean here on the introducing argument that identity always builds on illusions in the sense that it is not the real world or the real Self that is involved, but my perception of the Others’ responses to my action.

With the computer I can manipulate the responses so that I get them as I want them, which I can not do so easily with Real Others. With the computer I can *abstract* what is in reality *concrete*, i.e. the Other, and through this the impression of Virtual Reality is created. It rests on foundations that are as concrete and real as Real Reality, but the computer and its soft ware makes the concrete abstract, and this gives an illusory real character to much of what is done in front of the screen. The objection that this illusory character is already there, in the written word for example (instead of the directly spoken one), is not valid. Why? Because the computer introduces the two types of

interaction that are not there in reading a text. For one thing, there is a soft ware program that all the time anticipates what you are going to do, for another thing, most computer gaming today involves a RR partner, be it at the same screen, the other screen beside you, or at the other end of the line, in Chorea or Sweden or USA.

Computer Gaming and Abstract Sociality

What happens with sociality during these conditions? Some important things that have to do with the walk from concrete to abstract (sociality) should be important to investigate here. Asplund (1987) began to lineate this walk and its possible consequences, but did not include the computer in his reflections. It is time to do so. The concept of *abstract identification* very soon introduces itself. No concrete person from RR is there to mediate my way of introducing myself in the WoW game. It can be done only through the computer, to be done “correctly”. I.e. it can only be done abstractly.

Asplund has a theory that abstract sociality is a modern way of structuring mans´ social life so that it in lesser and lesser extent concerns everyday life endeavours to survive physically in the group, for example. Instead it concerns more and more such events as for example presenting larger and larger groups of people to each other in anonymous masses that do not have an “organic” relation to each other. This is given a pessimistic interpretation by Asplund; Abstract sociality is not seen by him as mainly creative.

It is worth studying how these processes can be regarded in computer gaming, an activity which probably can be said in the technical sense to draw abstract sociality to its extremes. It is tempting to go further: to look at the chat forums where people are totally incognito but still chat on very intimate subjects with other – totally unknown – people, and with no obligations whatsoever, of a concrete character. The possibilities that purely abstract sociality introduces are clearly perceptible in this. Is it possible to evaluate this both positively and negatively?

There is no a priori reason to condemn computer gaming in total on the basis of “abstract socialization”. Instead there seems to be a lot of evidence of concrete contact making through the computer, both in its gaming and chatting functions. And this seems to be valid in a wide array of questions. Thus let us, for a conclusion, go back to the positive picture of children with autism, which find in the predictably rational pattern of responses from the Virtual Other, a steady platform for departure into a confusing social world. This abstract sociality, in effect, is a way of preparing and training them for a more fruitful and concretely socializing way of life than they traditionally have had.

Anticipatory identification and computer gaming.

The process of evoking in the Other the same response as you evoke in yourself, given so heavy importance by Mead, includes the *anticipation* of the Others´ act. This is made in many ways from very elementary behaviour of subconscious character, to elaborate conscious reflective action. The most elementary sort is there already in nerve reflexes and primitive pre conscious behaviour: When walking and stumbling, I anticipate the behaviour of an organism protecting itself with arms or in other ways. In e.g. CS this elementary functioning is there, as I react to Others´ shot by hiding faster than I can think consciously. (The question whether this is reflex behaviour or a result of earlier learning is not important here, the point is that it is pre-conscious already by force of its speed. You have no time to “think it over”, you are just “programmed” to hide without thinking of it. The program is set in advance, and your body obeys, without your brain consciously thinking.)

The central point here is my knowledge that it is a game, and that the only way to win the game is to be a faster hider and/or shooter than my partner. I thus identify with the imagined person that has this virtue in a high degree. I try to cultivate a property that is there in myself, but which can be better than it is. I also identify with my partner in his ambition to be faster than myself to shoot. Only by identifying with my partner can I cultivate the skill of his *counterpart*, i.e. myself. I must know what he wants to do – in order to prevent him doing it.

Two capacities are there in the same second: a well known and reflected knowledge of the rules of the game, and a pre-conscious capacity to react physically so fast that your consciousness does not keep pace with your physical action. These are two opposites that stand out for each other. I put forward the hypothesis that the *combination of these two opposites* is a main reason for the fascination that CS evokes in many people. This trait is well known before computers and CS. It is there already in the old card game called “Fox starving”, where you must react to the colour of a new card faster than your partner, in order to “starve” him/her. But the computer makes much more of it than the old techniques. First, the degree of sophistication in the learned and reflected body of knowledge and rules is much greater, and second, you can decide yourself on many of the conditions of the game, e.g. by building your character, choosing your weapon or “killing technique” or whatever.

The two opposites of spontaneity and thoroughly reflected action exist at the same spot simultaneously and in the same act. They result in anticipatory identification that flourishes every second. And this trait is a major reason for the attractiveness of computer games.

A note on the character of this identification: It constitutes what I have called *functional identification*, i.e. performing similar actions as the partner does, implicitly and/or explicitly. This is not to exchange or mix with *existential identification* which gives a more thoroughgoing *experience* of “being the Other” or taking in the Others’ way of life or empathizing with him/her. Obviously the functional version is more primitive and less reflective than the existential one. The former goes deep in the neurological basis of the organism to the level I mentioned above of the organism automatically reacting when falling. The latter has many and complicated “super structures” based on the former, but it also transcends it, as the element of developed sociality is a precondition of the existential “roletaking” found in many versions in WoW and other on-line games. This means that existential identification is not in the first place a more developed or sophisticated form than the functional one. It introduces new elements into the process, and thus we have a qualitative, not a primarily quantitative, difference between the two forms. But both are demanded in the computer games, and my hypothesis is, to repeat, that the coexistence of different *and* similar demands on identification adds remarkably to the thrill of computer games.

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