The Influence of Video Games on 21st Century Youth Identity

by

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BA, Beijing Normal University Zhuhai, 2010

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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This study aims to explore the influence of video games on youth identity in 21st century in two aspects, personal identity and social identity. First, through playing video games, young players can create new personal identities and merge their own identity with their avatars’ identity. Second, video games help young players transform from culture receivers to culture producers. Based upon the open coding from the data, two themes are analyzed, which are the awareness of influence on identity and the impact of consoles and other media/devices on the influence of video games.
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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my grandpa, who struggled his whole life for our happiness
Chapter 1: Background and Purpose

Background

I have spent much of my life playing video games. I remember when I was five and I received a birthday gift from my uncle in the United States, a Nintendo entertainment system console. At first sight, I admit that I did not like it at all. It was bulky and grey, not as fancy as my transformers and not as interesting as my comic books. My uncle told me that young kids in the United States were crazy about this machine and dreamed about having one. It was 1992, seven years after the Nintendo entertainment system console was released in North America. In Mainland China, after so many years of seclusion from the outside world, people hesitated to take the first step to see what the rest of the world looked like. I was so lucky to be part of the first generation to own a Nintendo console, which changed my life.

Like most people in China, my parents had never encountered video games, so even though they knew I was going to play video games, they did not stop me. They even thought I was learning English because its operational language was English. I admit that it was not easy for a five-year-old kid to figure out how to play the Nintendo console without knowing any English or Japanese. Finally, after several days’ hard work, I knew how to start it and launch games. It was interesting that I did not know the meaning of “start” on the screen but after some trials I figured out that by pushing directional buttons and one red button on the deck in my hands, I could choose that “start” on the screen and launch the games. I invited all my friends to come to my home to play games with me; of course none of them had experienced Nintendo before. We played four games at that time: Duck Hunt, Excitebike, Hogan’s Alley, and Wild Gunman. Through our joint effort, we
figured out how two players could compete in one game and how to choose different playing modes. By then, I understood why this mysterious machine could conquer millions of children and drive them to spend days and nights on it.

Another instance that stands out in my mind occurred seven years later. By 1998, I had played hundreds of games and updated my console to the latest Nintendo entertainment system. I was a good player and no game could keep me sitting in front of the TV longer than one afternoon. I found all games based on the Nintendo console were designed almost in the same mode and they no longer interested me. I knew it was time to find something new to play. I heard that older adolescents had begun to play games on computers, which could provide more delicate pictures, more interesting plots, and more fun. I persuaded my parents to buy me a computer by saying I was going to learn how to type and how to use a computer. In fact, it just took me one day to master how to use a computer. By mastering, I mean how to start and shut down, how to set up programs, and how to input with keyboard and mouse, which was enough for me to play games.

Although I had played many games on the Nintendo console, computer games still shocked me with their marvellous graphics and complex game modes. Unlike Nintendo games, computer games needed much more time to play through and games could be saved at particular spots in the game. In this way I could load saved games to continue my adventure next time without worrying about my mom pulling me away for dinner. As computer games consumed much more time than the Nintendo console, my mom began to complain that I wasted a lot of time on gaming and had no time for homework. In order to play computer games at weekends, I had to study hard to get better grades to win some time for playing as a reward. Meanwhile, I began to save money for more game
disks and magazines introducing new games and strategies. I began to talk with my friends about the different game strategies we had online and offline. Sometimes I posted my opinions about a game and my special strategies on some online game forums, but mostly I learned from other good players and updated my playing. Through these interactions with other players, I found that chatting about games was sometimes more interesting than playing.

When I was in grade 10, my parents tried to persuade me to stop playing video games by saying I should spend more time learning. We did not realize that playing video games had become an essential part of my life. If I quit playing, I would probably lose my friends who were still playing video games. To me, playing video games was not the most important part. The fun and pleasure I got when I played with my friends, when I talked with other players about games, and when I shared and received game experiences online seemed more important to me.

Although I cannot quit playing video games, I do feel guilty when I play. I feel this way because society, parents, teachers, and the mainstream perceive us as students and being a student means one’s main job is reading, writing, and passing exams. I accepted that perception and never questioned it until I went to graduate school when I started to investigate identity and its influence on youths, as well as how gamer identity is taken up by others.

What strikes me now, looking back at my game-filled childhood, are the joys and bitterness video games brought to my gamer friends and me. Why did most of my gamer friends not quit playing video games despite the pressure from parents, teachers, and the public? Did they know that pressure came from their student identity perceived by
society? Did they ever think carefully about their identity? And who decided who they were?

The Purpose of This Research Study
Sanford, Merkel, and Madill (2011) noted:

Video games have, in the past two decades, taken up a prominent place in the lives of children and adolescents, and been blamed for many of the social problems we see manifested in video game play—violence, competition, individualism, sexist and racist attitudes. (p. 1).

After recognizing that video games will not disappear from the lives of youths, more educators are undertaking game-related research to explore what gamers can gain from playing video games and how video games could influence youths’ identities and lives.

Before the emergence of mass media, people’s identities (personal and social) were mainly determined by their education, family, gender, community, ethnic group, and religion (Kellner, 1995). At that time people’s identities were fixed once they were built up, however, the emergence of mass media changed that fixed mode. Kellner’s (1995) study indicated that media culture in the form of printed books, newspapers, magazines, movies, radios, video games, and the Internet provided individuals with abundant materials and resources to re-think and re-shape their personal and social identity. In terms of personal identity, youths now have more resources and opportunities to break the fixed mode and change their personal characteristics, interests, and favourite activities more easily than ever before, so their personal identities are various and changing all the time. However, their social identities haven’t changed because
mainstream society still holds outdated perception about what role should youths play in their lives, for example obedient children at home and diligent students at school.

Studying this the influence of video games on youths’ identity may help parents, teachers, and the public understand why youth need video games in their lives and re-think their outdated perception of youth since the emergence of video games. Video games and other media cultures are ways in which youths’ voices can be heard by society. It is naïve to believe that depriving youths of access to video games will make them become obedient children at home and diligent students at school or any other images that the mainstream society wants youths to be. Studying the influence of video games on youths’ identity can let parents and teachers realize that their old perceptions of youths need to be re-evaluated and up-dated. More importantly, we have to understand that youths are urgent to change their out-dated image perceived by mainstream society.

Primary Research Questions

The exploration of identity began when we humans began to think. Questions such as “Who are we?” and “What makes us human?” have been engaging philosophers in the Academy in Athens to modern educators devoting their life to these questions.

According to Fearon (1999), the simplest answer to the question “What is identity?” seems easy: a person’s identity is how the person defines who he or she is. This simple definition of identity gives rise to many questions. First, one might define himself or herself differently on different occasions. For example, I might say I am “a Chinese,” “a student,” “a son,” or “a guy who loves playing video games” but in some situations I can also be “a blood-elf mage” or “a barbarian warrior.” When I am playing video games at home, I am a “son” and a “blood-elf mage” at the same time. In some
video games, players can even control more than one avatar at the same time. Second, how one person defines himself is not always the way society perceives him. In the example above, how I define myself is different from how my mom perceives me. My mom perhaps sees me as a bad student who spends too much time sitting in front of the computer and playing games she does not understand. In contrast, I see myself as a digital native who grew up in an electronic and digital environment in the real world, and a raid leader who developed different tactics in various situations and coordinated team members.

For many years, my young friends and I have been confused by the problem that the way we perceive ourselves is always disconnected from the way mainstream society perceives us. Sometimes these two perceptions are even opposite to each other. Young people tend to show their characteristics to the rest of the world such as being energetic, creative, innovative, and passionate. Undoubtedly, mainstream society accepts all these advantages of youths, but when it comes to important matters such as education and employment, society pays more attention to our disadvantages such as being inexperienced, impatient, and informal. I believe that this identity misperception exists in almost every social group, which means the way we express ourselves to society and the way society perceives us are not always the same. Besides the inevitable misperception, the lack of channels where others can hear youths’ voice is another important problem, which aggravates the misperception. By studying the way in which video games influence youths’ identity and the relationship between players and avatars, I will explore:

In what ways can video games change the misperception of identity?
How do video games influence youths’ identity?

What is the relationship between players and avatars?
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Definitions of Identity

The study of identity was first raised in philosophy as Theseus’ paradox, also known as the ship of Theseus, which asks whether a wooden ship is still the same ship if all its wooden parts are replaced by new planks. This paradox has been discussed by many philosophers including Socrates, Plato, Plutarch, and more recently by Thomas Hobbes who developed the paradox further in the Enlightenment by asking if the original planks are gathered together and used to build a new ship, which one is the ship of Theseus? Similarly, the human body constantly creates new cells to replace old cells just like the ship of Theseus, so are we still the same person?

In order to judge whether an entity, such as a person or a ship, is still the original one, philosophers have to see whether its identity is unchanged. According to Fearon (1999), a philosophical identity is the properties of one entity that, if they are changed, is no longer the same entity. The predicates are essential to one entity being that entity rather than being merely contingent. For example, an individual’s essential predicates are his or her characteristics, memories, values, faiths, and so on. If one person loses all his or her hair, we would say that he or she is still the same person as before; however, if one person suffers from a serious mental disease, we might not. For a ship, its identity is everything that happened to it, including its sailing history, stories about it, and the crew’s memories about it. In summary, in philosophy, identity is the relation each thing bears just to itself.

In contrast, sociological identity concerns a person’s self-presentation, social perception, and aspects of a person that make him different from others.
According to Fearon’s (1999) study, sociological identity is presently used in two linked senses, which may be termed “social” and “personal.”

The social identity refers simply to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and (alleged) characteristic features or attributes. The personal identity is some distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable. (p. 2)

Fearon (1999) indicated that a social identity is just a social category, a group of people designated by a label (or labels) that is commonly used either by the people designated, by others, or both. This is the sense employed when we refer to “Canadians” and “immigrants,” “Christians” and “Muslims,” “gamers” and “non-gamers” as identities. A personal identity, based upon Fearon’s study, is a set of attributes, beliefs, desires, or principles of action that a person thinks distinguish him in socially relevant ways. In this sense, personal identity can be religious beliefs, educational background, personal values, or simply personal preference.

Sometimes the separation between social identity and personal identity is blurred depending on the circumstances. For example, based on the context, I might give different answers to the question: “Who are you?” I might say, “a Chinese,” “a student,” “a gamer,” or “a tall boy who likes video games and basketball.”

**Avatar**

Before going to deep discussion of the influence of video games, some technical terms should be defined. Avatar is the base of most video games, and also it is closest to players among all game elements. Avatar is the graphical figure representing a player in
the virtual game world (Castronova, 2003). Usually an avatar is the thing we control in a video game, and its appearance is various and not limited to human figures. What makes an avatar distinguished from other non-player characters is that an avatar is the reflection of a player and bears his or her will (Gee, 2003). Castronova introduced the origin of avatar in his study:

In 1996, 3DO studios released a computer game called *Meridian 59*. The game allowed players to enter the gaming space by Internet connection, and it allowed a large number of them to enter at the same time. Each player’s screen became a viewport on this world; looking at it, one could see houses, buildings, fields, and other players. The players appeared in the game world as graphical objects that looked like human bodies. Like human bodies, these graphical objects had to run across space to get from point A to point B; they had to climb stairs or ladders to get on the roof of a building; they had to watch out for dangerous monsters, or, more precisely, computer-driven graphical objects that looked like monsters, whose primitive artificial intelligence code instructed them to kill anything that looked human. To avoid the monsters, or kill them first, the players had to give their human representations similar kinds of orders: look over here for the monster; run to it; get out a sword; attack. Because there were other players in the same play space, players could access more complex commands: ask your friend to come over here; agree to attack the monster together; split up loot from the monster; trade some of the money to a third player for a magic helmet.

(Castronova, 2003, p. 2)

According to Castronova (2003), graphical objects controlled by players are
called avatars or PCs (player character), and those controlled by computers are called NPCs (non-player character). Castronova (2003) continued:

The avatar is the representation of the self in a given physical environment. The Earth has a physical environment, with certain laws of motion, gravity, force, and so on. Things that happen on Earth are seen, heard, and felt by us, through the medium of our physical senses. Thus, when our minds experience the Earth, they do so through our bodies . . . . Our real bodies are, in some sense, our Earth avatars: when we are in Earth, our selves are present in and represented by a body that exists in Earth, and only there.

When we visit a virtual world, we do so by inhabiting a body that exists there, and only there. The virtual body, like the Earth body, is an avatar. When visiting a virtual world, one treats the avatar in that world like a vehicle of the self, a car that your mind is driving. You “get in,” look out the window through your virtual eyes, and then drive around by making your virtual body move. The avatar mediates our self in the virtual world: we inhabit it; we drive it; we receive all of our sensory information about the world from its standpoint. (p. 4)

Although the most advanced technology does not allow players to immerse themselves completely in a computer virtual world, players can still experience the worlds vividly, in the sense that they immerse their minds in the virtual world. Based upon my own experience, after logging into the game, players are usually not aware of their real-world surroundings and give primary attention to signals from virtual reality, with only secondary attention to what happens around them. Castronova (2003) stated, “The player no longer seems to be ‘here,’ but rather is ‘there,’ even to the point that
events ‘there’ take on more emotional meaning than anything the person experiences on Earth” (p. 5).

The Influence of Video Games on 21st Century Youths—Personal Identity

In this section, I will introduce two aspects in which video games influence the personal identity of youths. First, video games provide youths with new platforms to create a new personal identity. Second, through the interaction between players and avatars, players’ personal identity and their avatars’ identity are merged into one combined identity.

The creation of new personal identity.

“As players participate in MUDs, they become authors not only of text, but also of themselves, constructing selves through social interaction” (Turkle, 1997, p. 270). MUD (multi-user domain) is the earliest version of online games, which combines role-playing, online chatting, and player interaction. Like the later MMORPG (massively multi-player online role-playing game), in a MUD, players can control their avatars to explore the virtual reality, pick up objects, and interact with other players and non-player characters, but all this is based upon text rather than graphical or animated arts.

Without any graphical arts or animation, avatars in a MUD are just user names; however, this simple name offers players an opportunity to do whatever they want without being constrained by the real world.

Created characters need not be human and there may be more than two genders.

In the course of play, characters have casual and romantic sex, hold jobs, attend rituals and celebrations, fall in love and get married. To say the least, such goings-on are gripping: “This is more real than my real life,” says a character who turns
out to be a man playing a woman who is pretending to be a man. (Turkle, 1997, p. 270)

Avatars exist almost everywhere in video games. When I play *Snake* on a cell phone, my avatar is the flashing spot I control; when I play *World of Warcraft*, my avatars are the fantasy characters I create and control; even when I use Facebook, I am using avatars, although I can give the avatars the same profile and information as myself. According to Gee (2003), and Thomas (2007), when players create avatars in video games or on online social networks, they are actually creating and constructing new identities.

Palfrey and Gasser (2008) explained how youths create and construct new identities while creating and controlling avatars in video games and online social networks, as follows:

A 16-year-old girl can now create a new identity and go into an online environment where people do not know who she is, at least for a while. She might create a profile of herself in a new social network. She could present herself in a way that is strikingly different from the way she presents herself in real space. She could even create an avatar in a virtual world, such as *Gaia Online* or *Club Penguin*, or in a gaming environment such as *World of Warcraft*, as a way to try out an identity that is not tethered to any other identity she’s had in the past. Someone would have to do some serious digging on her to tie these multiple identities together. In this sense, our Digital Native could reinvent herself many times over without leaving her bedroom, much less her village. And she need not
explore these identities successively over time; instead, she can create them all in one day and explore them simultaneously. (p. 20)

New identities are built up by showing different selves to specific audiences. For example, I can express myself as a diligent student in the real world, and a race leader mastering various tactics in *World of Warcraft*. My friends and parents will never know or meet my guild members in the game, so all they know about me is based upon what they see. According to Palfrey and Gasser (2008), digital natives (the young generation born in the digital age) are experimenting with multiple identities, and their online identities might be different from their everyday, real-space identities.

**The merging of players’ personal identity and avatars’ identity.**

When people talk about their activities in the game world, they use the pronoun “I,” identifying him or her “self” with the avatar created for the game, which according to Filiciak (2005), is the process of introjection—the subject is projected inward into an “other.” Filiciak (2005) argued that the subject (player) and the “other” (the onscreen avatar) do not stand at opposite sides of the mirror anymore—they become one.

While using an electronic medium in which subject and object, real and imagined, are not clearly separated, the player loses his or her identity, projecting himself or herself inward, becoming the “other,” and identifies with the avatar in the game.

During the game, the player’s identity ends in disintegration, and the merger of users’ and avatars’ consciousness ensues. (Filiciak, 2005, p. 91)

In MMORPGs, people (other players in the virtual world and friends in the real world) perceive us based upon our avatars, because when I am controlling an avatar in a MMORPG, all my attention is on that avatar. As I mentioned in the avatar and character section, it is easy for players to become immersed in the virtual reality and give primary attention to signals from there when they are playing. I feel what that avatar feels, I think what that avatar thinks, and that avatar does what I want to do. In other words, I am more
my own avatar than the person sitting by the console or computer. According to Filiciak (2005), to specify which of these identities is truer or more false is probably impossible. In any case, it would appear that our virtual “self” is closer to our image of ourselves than the one we present, which is governed by requirements and expectations of “real” life (pp. 92-93).

According to Palfrey and Gasser’s (2008) study, the merging and combination of youth players’ identity and avatars’ identity happens constantly and unconsciously, and no matter how often youths create new avatars and change the appearance or attributes of their avatars, they are more bound to a single combined identity.

Digital natives are certainly experimenting with multiple identities. Sometimes, they are recreating or amplifying aspects of their real-space identities when they go online. In other instances, they are experimenting online with who they are, trying on roles and looks and relationships that they might never dare to try in “real space.” . . . But from the perspective of the observer, it’s also likely that these identities might converge . . . . From the perspective of the onlooker, much more of the digital native’s identity may be visible at any one moment than was possible for individuals in pre-Internet eras. If the digital native has created multiple identities, the identities might be connected to create a much fuller picture of the individual than was possible before, spanning a greater period of time. Because of the use of digital technologies over the years, the result is more than a snapshot; instead it is more of a record of the individual’s life that continues to accumulate over time. (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008, p. 35)
The Influence of Video Games on 21st Century Youths—Social Identity

Social identity in the 21st century cf. traditional society.

According to Fearon’s (1999) study, social identity is just a social category, and to have a particular identity means to assign oneself to a particular social category or perhaps be assigned to it by others. This definition of social identity has remained similar for many years but the content and stability has changed. The content of social identity has been broadened with the development of human society; for example, now we have more occupations and titles that did not exist such as electronics engineer, psychiatrist, and video game player. Not only has the context been broadened but the number of social identities acquired by individuals has also been increasing and becoming more complex. A man could be a father at home, a peasant in the field, a Christian in the church, a Caucasian and an illiterate person, which represents the five most important factors that decide the individual’s social identity—family, occupation, religion, education, and ethnic group and community (Kellner, 1995). In the digital age, the determining factors become unlimited and uncountable, and together with the help of media culture, individuals can acquire different social identities at the same time; for example, one can be a hip-hop fan, a psychiatrist, a Buddhist, and a video game player.

The media culture and the development of modern society have influenced the stability of an individual’s social identity. Kellner’s (1995) study described the stability of social identity in traditional society as follows:

According to anthropological and sociological folklore, in traditional societies, one’s identity was fixed, solid, and stable. Identity was a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths which provided orientation and religious sanctions to define one’s place in the world, while rigorously
circumscribing the realm of thought and behaviour. One was born and died a member of one’s clan, of a fixed kinship system, and of one’s tribe or group with one’s life trajectory fixed in advance. In pre-modern societies, identity was unproblematic and not subject to reflection or discussion. Individuals did not undergo identity crises, or radically modify their identity. One was a hunter and a member of the tribe and gained one’s identity through these roles and functions.

(p. 231)

In past eras, individuals’ identities were fixed and substantial and once they were established and accepted, they were hard to change, because individuals lacked materials and resources to re-create and re-shape how others perceived them once a stereotype was established. According to Palfrey and Gasser (2008), no matter how hard one tried to change one’s identity, his or her fellow villagers might still recall earlier versions of the identity. If people wanted to change their social identity radically, they could move a sufficient distance away, say, to another town whose inhabitants had little communication with the residents of the town in which the person had previously lived.

According to Bauman (1994), the features of the post-modern lifestyle are lack of cohesion. The post-modern individual’s personality is not quite definite, its final form is never reached, and it can be manipulated. Filiciak (2005) argued that we “receive no implied form of our ‘self,’ but, instead, we construct it incessantly. Today we repeatedly change our appearance, hobbies, professions, and our residences; everything is transient and temporary” (p. 94). Filiciak believed that the pressures influencing identity are augmented by the mass media along with the lifestyle promoted by consumerism. In contemporary society, the consumer identity is becoming indispensable among most
people’s multiple social identities. We not only purchase daily commodities, we also purchase information from the media and knowledge from school. At the same time, we ourselves become like the products, which by means of the information and knowledge we consumed, engage in competition for an attractive partner, a well-paid job, or social respect (Filiciak, 2005).

**Video games provide youths with new opportunities.**

In his study of open-ended games, Squire (2008) examined how players can transform from culture and knowledge consumer to producer by playing in a creative way rather than following the game rules. According to Squire’s study (2008), open-ended games are identified as follows: Open-ended games typically place one in a role of sorts (such as the leader of a civilization). Despite this, the game is less about assuming a particular type of identity (say a SWAT team member, or a science journalist in an epistemic role-playing game), and more about inhabiting a world from a general perspective, which the player can play out in whatever manner suits his or her taste. In these games, learning resembles a process of coming to understand a system, experimenting with multiple ways of being within that system, and then using that system for creative expression, usually enacted within communities of other players. The game structure is less about reproducing a particular way of thinking and more about creating spaces for knowledge creation and discovery. (p. 171)

In these open-ended games, such as the *Civilization* series, *Grand Theft Auto* series and *SimCity*, players do not assume a particular type of identity as they do in ordinary video games but take up a role of some sort such as a military leader in *Civilization* or a citizen in *SimCity*. In most non-open-ended video games, in order to keep playing, players have to follow certain rules. The most common rule is keeping players completing endless missions. Only by completing different missions can players
progress through the storyline and keep playing. However, there is no particular rule for players to follow in open-ended games. For example, in Civilization, there is no need for players to extend the storyline by completing missions. In fact, there is no exact storyline in games like Civilization, where players can control the game and create their own storyline.

According to Kellner (1995), “Radio, television, film, and the other products of the culture industries provide the models of what it means to be male or female, successful or a failure, powerful or powerless” (p. 1). The culture media set up a series of paradigms that tell us what is right and wrong. In contrast, there is no paradigm or norm in open-ended games for players to follow. Open-ended games encourage players to design their own rules and create their own stories. In an open-ended game, players receive only the necessary materials provided by designers but they produce more valuable ideas and knowledge (Squire, 2008). Both MUDs (multiple domain, a multiplayer real-time virtual world) and later MMORPGs belong to open-ended games. Turkle (1995) believed that in an open-ended game, players are authors, creators, and consumers of media content. Participating in a MUD or a MMORPG has much in common with script writing, performance art, street theatre, and improvisational theatre, which develop people’s potential to become culture producers.

According to Prensky (2001), youths are knowledge consumers who receive information from schooling. School education is built upon scores and tests, leaving little space for adolescents to produce their own culture and explore unknown fields. In contrast, video games provide a better platform for young people to unlock their talents in game design, game-related literacies, and game manoeuvring. As gamers are constantly
creating, distributing, and modifying their own games and game-related literacies, it is
difficult to say that they are just consumers (Sanford, Merkel, & Madill, 2011). As
gamers produce more and more valuable game-related knowledge, it is time for educators
to relocate the role of video games in adolescents’ lives, review the preconception of
youths as merely culture and knowledge receivers and consumers, and to study the
complexity of youth’s identity.

According to Squire (2008), open-ended video games have made two
contributions to the development of the producer identity. The first is the open system in
which gamers can create and modify their own strategies and storylines. The second is
the game editor system that provides gamers with abundant resources to design their own
scenarios and machinimas.

Elson & Riedl (2007) defined machinima as “the innovation of leveraging video
game technology to greatly ease the creation of computer animation” (p. 8).

Rather than building complex graphical worlds, machinima artists carefully
manipulate the behavior of video games. By choreographing their avatars,
machinima artists can “perform” for a player whose perspective represents
the camera, record what the camera player sees, and edit the clips into a
narrative film (often adding dubbed dialogue) (Elson & Riedl, 2007, p. 8).

Now an increasing number of youths are using machinimas to present their
opinions and identities to the world. The contents of machinimas vary from love,
courage, adventure, to sarcastic content aimed at the autocratic rule of the government.
For example, War of Internet Addiction “is an anti-censorship machinima advocacy
production on behalf of the Mainland Chinese World of Warcraft community” (Chao &
Canaves, 2010). The machinima satirizes the Chinese government’s excessively strict video game censorship, cultural dictatorship, and electroshock therapy for purported Internet addiction (Chao & Canaves, 2010). From 2009 to 2010, as one of the *World of Warcraft* players, I experienced an anxious wait for the new version of the game with millions of other players in Mainland China. The reason for the wait was that the Bureau of Publication and the Department of Culture had different censorship rules for *World of Warcraft* so the new expansion pack could not be released.

Once the *War of Internet Addiction* was released online, the video struck a chord with the broader public by pointing to the lack of Internet freedom and conveying a general feeling of helplessness. “Chinese gamers and non-gamers alike are hailing *War of Internet Addiction* as a poignant, insightful take on the long and difficult battle with government Internet controls and the general lack of public empowerment” (Chao & Canaves, 2010).

Other than machinima, players can produce new cultures by designing their own game scenarios through open-ended games. In fact, the game design industry takes advantage of the inspiration of the scenarios created by gamers. For example, based upon Squire’s (2008) study, one of the world-famous online game design communities, Apolyton University, developed an alternative design document—hundreds of pages long—for the developers of *Civilization*. The most active members of that community were recruited to participate in the *Civilization IV* design process. The gamers’ experience encouraged others to devote themselves to game designing, which might produce valuable ideas and knowledge as well as promoting the game industry. In the
process of improving game design, the gamers developed their potential as culture producers and understood the complexity of their identity.

**Conclusion**

In the literature review, I first explained the definition of identity by dividing identity into personal identity and social identity. By studying the definition of personal identity and social identity separately, further discussion was generated on the influence of video games on 21st century youths’ personal identity and social identity. In terms of personal identity, video games provide youths with platforms to create a new identity. Second, through the interaction between players and avatars, players’ personal identity and avatars’ identity are merged into one combined identity. In terms of social identity, I discussed how video games could provide youths with new opportunities such as machinima-making and scenario designing in open-ended games to help develop their potential as culture producers and understand the complexity of their identity.
Chapter 3: Methodology

Participants

This research involved seven young gamers (from 18 to 28 years old) living in my local community. The participants include native-born Canadians and international students, males and females, undergraduate and graduate students and recent university graduates. Having participants from different backgrounds provides me with a broader sense about video games because they have different attitudes towards video games. They also have different stories, enabling consideration of differences related to experience, culture, gender, and other socio-cultural factors. Culture is an important factor in engaging with video games; for example, young gamers from Asian families might experience more pressure from their parents and peers than their Caucasian fellows, because Asian culture pays more attention to students’ grades than the western counterpart. Having participants from different backgrounds therefore broadens the scope of the findings and results of this research to the multicultural level.

The way in which I recruited my participants is called the snowball technique. First, I talked to some of my classmates at the University of Victoria about my research plan; then I asked them to help me spread my research plan and my contact information to their friends and classmates. Those who were interested in my research contacted me and I selected my participants from them. During the research, participants created their pseudonyms and only their pseudonyms were used to refer to them.

Craig

Craig is a 28-year-old Canadian–Japanese male who grew up in Victoria. Craig graduated from the University of Victoria four years ago and is working as an automotive
mechanic. Craig has been playing video games since he was very young. He started to play *the Legend of Zelda* on the 8-bit Nintendo and continues to do so. He loves fantasy and puzzle solving. Craig has a strong attachment to physical game disks and game consoles and he showed me his huge collection on which he spends a lot of time and money. As for his identity, Craig is someone who likes to be in the middle and does not like going to extremes. He said:

I always choose something in the middle, because these middle guys can do everything a little. I think it is partly like maybe an Asian thing, you don’t want to stick out, and you just want to be normal. And also I don’t want to commit to one thing, I want to be able to change as the game happens. I like to have these options without being stuck with one thing.

**Kira**

Kira is an 18-year-old male Chinese student studying software engineering at the University of Victoria. Kira belongs to the new generation of gamers who started to play video games in the early 2000s when the Internet became popular and video games became more immersive than before. He likes to be one of the top players in the game as well as in the real world. Kira enjoys competition with other players and always commits time and energy to becoming the best. The more difficult the challenge is, the more fun he has.

**Laura**

Laura is a 24-year-old female Chinese student studying linguistics at the University of Victoria. She is the only female participant in my research. Laura started to
play video games because she thought it was fashionable. She views video games as a way of accomplishing her dreams by expressing a different self in the games.

**Napoleon**

Napoleon is a 21-year-old Canadian male who just finished studying at Camosun College and is now looking for a job. Napoleon has been playing video games for a long time but he regrets the time he has spent. Napoleon said, “I think if I didn’t play video games, I would do homework and study not just go home playing games until bedtime, and I probably would be a smarter person today.” Napoleon blames his dissatisfaction about himself on video games but he cannot quit playing despite that.

**Sol**

Sol is a 22-year-old Canadian male from Vancouver, studying creative writing at the University of Victoria. Sol started playing video games at a very young age because his father is a computer engineer. Seen as big and strong from the outside, Sol likes to think of himself as more of an intellectual person. As he said, “I have flexibilities, and I like to approach problems intellectually and try to solve puzzles in that way.”

**Sorin**

Sorin is a 25-year-old Canadian Chinese who grew up in Victoria. Sorin has always had a strong relationship with characters and avatars in the games, and he likes to mimic the characters and avatars. Sorin is an easy-going person and does not like to follow others so he usually chooses characters or avatars that few people pick and he can build up a connection between himself and his character or avatar.
Stukka

Stukka is a 22-year-old Canadian male from Edmonton. I recruited Stukka as a participant because he has played far more games than normal gamers. Stukka spends almost all his leisure time playing video games and he plays to win rather than just for fun. He said, “I am usually very competitive in the game, and I want to push myself to be as good as possible. Winning and losing means a lot to me. I do a lot of homework on gaming in order to become more skilful and I watch the replay of every single game I lost, trying to find out my misplays and fix them.” In the real world Stukka is a friendly and fairly outgoing person. He said playing online games helped him to become mature faster than others of his age.

Case Study

I chose case study methodology in this research for various reasons. First, case studies are commonly used to answer “how” and “why” questions because they offer a kind of perceptiveness that might not be achieved by other approaches (Rowley, 2002). In this study I am examining the influence of video games on youths’ identity, which needs deep analysis of participants’ behaviour and thoughts. I interviewed my participants to collect data about the basic demographics and experiential information such as age, gender, cultural background, and attitudes towards video games. In the second data collection session, I drew upon narrative inquiry to let participants tell their own stories and experiences. Case studies are appropriate for multiple methods and/or data resources through which researchers can create a full and deep examination of the case (Berg & Lune, 2012). Ultimately, video games, with their rapid technological advances, are fresh and constantly changing research areas. Case studies are “particularly well suited to new research areas or research areas for which existing theory seems
The case study method is defined and understood in various ways. According to Yin (1994), “A case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 13). Stake (1995) argued that case studies allow systematic strategies of inquiry that investigate in depth an event, program, activity, and process with one or more individuals in a real-life context. Hagan (2006) simply defined the case study method as “in-depth, qualitative studies of one or a few illustrative cases” (p. 240). Taken together, these definitions and explanations suggest that the case study is an approach capable of examining simple or complex phenomena, with units of analysis varying from single individuals to large corporations, business and worldwide events. It uses a variety of lines of action in its data-collecting segments and can make full use of (and contribute to) the application of theory (Yin, 2003).

**Interview and Narrative Inquiry**

The qualitative data was collected by interviews and narrative inquiry. The interview is a useful method of gathering complicated, sensitive, and/or non-verbal information. Interviewing has become “one of the most common and most powerful methods we use to understand our fellow human beings” (Fontana & Frey, 1994, p. 361). Qualitative researchers use interviews with questions are meant to assist in gathering data to answer larger research questions.

According to Gill & Goodson (2011), “the purpose of narrative analysis is to unfold the ways individuals make sense of their lived experience and how it’s telling enables them to interpret the social world and their agency within it” (p. 160). The basic
drive of narrative inquiry is to understand the experience of a storyteller (Riessman, 2008) and is ideally suited to answering my question. As I mentioned above in the case study section, it is imperative to go deeply into participants’ thoughts or experiences to explore the identity shift and/or transformation. Narrative inquiry is therefore the best choice for this study to allow participants to explain their feelings and experience through story that cannot be easily captured by other research methods. Narrative inquiry is not simply a repetition of participants’ stories, and the approach to analysis is determined by the research questions, the researcher’s epistemological position and his or her lived experience in connection with the research topic (Gill & Goodson, 2011). It is the art of telling the stories of others with authentic interpretations by creating meaningful patterns from what may first appear as a random series of events (Riessman, 2008). The art of narrative inquiry is embedded in the researchers’ understanding of the experiences of storytellers. Narrative inquiry is a written representation of the spoken word, with researchers and storytellers involved in the creation (Riessman, 2008).

Data Collection

There were two data collection sessions in my research study. Before collecting any data, each participant created a pseudonym for himself or herself. During the research, only the pseudonym was used in order to protect participants’ privacy. Each participant completed two data collection sessions in two days.

Session One

Pre-narrative Interviews (time: 30-45 minutes). I carried out interviews with each participant to talk about his/her gaming history, attitudes towards video games, and the relationship between video games and their identities. I started the conversation by
collecting basic information such participants’ favourite games and when they started playing video games. Then, by asking more in-depth questions, information such as personal and social identity, their favourite characters and avatars’ identities, and the relationship between these identities and characters emerged. This interview was not confined to questions and answers. I tried to encourage participants to share their stories and feelings about video games and their identity.

Session Two

*Self-narrative (time: 30 minutes).* Session Two was one week after session one in order to let participants spend some time thinking about the previous interview and my research question. During this time, I re-interviewed my participants and focused on those who show interest in video games.

Participants told their own stories based on how video games have influenced their lives. I started the conversation by discussing their most unforgettable moment about video games, and then lead them on to self-narrative. The whole process of self-narrative was audio taped.

*After-narrative Interviews (time: 20 minutes).* I carried out a 20-minute interview with each participant immediately after the self-narrative. Based upon their narratives, I asked my participants how they coordinated the relationships between themselves and their avatars, the virtual world and the real world. Unlike the casual interview in Session One, the after-narrative interview examined the participants’ stories and experiences (narrated in the narrative inquiry section), and I tried to dig deeply into their thoughts and experiences to explore whether there is any relation between their identity and video games.
During the data collection, I tried to maintain my role as an outside observer to collect data and observe the participants. I chose not to be a participant in my research because I have already read many books and articles about identity and video games and designed this research myself, so I know what kind of information I believe is positive and what is not.

The data helped me to answer my primary research questions in two ways. First, participants’ attitudes towards video games helped me to understand the relationship between youths and video games, and information from different perspectives helped me to understand the role of video games in youths’ lives. Second, participants’ stories and experiences helped me understand the influence of video games on youths’ identity. Through their narratives and stories, I tried to determine changes that have happened to their identity and find whether or not there was any relationship between the identity changes and video games.
Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter describes the results of the interviews conducted with my seven participants. Three categories emerged from the data analysis process through open coding. The first category, ‘Avatar and Player’, shows how the participants introduce their own identities and their favorite avatars’ identities and describes how they perceive the relationship between these two identities. The second category, ‘Two Worlds’, describes the participants’ involvement in and perceptions of the virtual game world and determines whether they see themselves as having a different identity in the virtual world from the one in the real world. The third and final category is ‘Gains’, where the participants explain their perceived gains from playing video games.

Avatars and Players

This section focuses on the relationship between the participants’ identities and their characters’ or avatars’ identities. Three questions were discussed with the participants in this section: 1) What is your identity? 2) What is your favorite character or avatar’s identity? 3) What is the relationship between your identity and your favorite character or avatar’s identity? Depending on their opinions about the relationship between those two identities, I divided the seven participants into three groups. The first group was comprised of those who think the two identities were the same, the second group was comprised of those who think the two identities were similar to each other, and participants in the third group believed that the two identities were totally different.

Group one had two members, Kira and Stukka, who both thought that the two identities were exactly the same.
Kira enjoys playing solo and competing with others: “I usually like playing by myself other than playing within a team. But I like competing with others, so I usually choose to play the character that is really hard to control because those characters often have more advantages in combat”. Kira’s favorite avatar is a robot set called Freedom that he controls in SD Gundam Capsule Fighter Online. Kira described Freedom in the following:

*Freedom* is a character in the middle between close combat type and range attack type, which is the reason I like it because I have more choices when I am in battle. Also I like it because it is hard to control and has lots of advanced skills.

During the interview I found that all Kira’s game avatars were “very hard to control”, which I think is related to his preferences in challenges and competition. According to Kira, “These hard-to-control avatars are not designed for new players and casual players, but they are the best choice for those who want to be competitive and super-skilled”. Kira believed that his personal identity and *Freedom*’s identity shared much in common, such as competitive and aggressive.

Stukka described himself as a “friendly”, “stubborn” and “medium outgoing” boy, “good at interacting with people”, and “never says no to a quest or something like that”. In the real world, he likes “protecting others, leading the team, meeting the challenge head on and muscling through them”. In the game world he plays as the “tank” who usually stands in front of the whole team protecting others and giving orders to team members in the battle, which reflects Stukka’s identity in real life. Stukka said, “I did a lot of dungeon farming (a type of group mission in *World of Warcraft*) so I was
interacting with a lot of people, and I didn’t ever remember putting people down or being put down”, which indicated that his avatar in the game was as friendly as he was in the real life. According to Stukka, both his personal identity and his avatar’s identity were friendly, enthusiastic, and selfless.

Group two had three members, Craig, Laura and Sol, who all thought that their personal identities and their avatars’ identities were similar but not exactly the same.

Considering his Asian heritage, Craig always chooses to be in the middle: “I usually don’t go to either extreme or stick out, and I always choose something in the middle and I like something in the middle, because these middle guys can do a little bit of everything”. Craig’s favorite avatar is Link in The Legend of Zelda, who is a young adventurer wearing a green hood. Craig described Link as “a young and righteous hero standing out against evil power when everyone else is in despair”. When Craig was playing Link, according to the storyline, he had to stick out from the rest to defend justice. After playing Link for a long time, Craig believed he was influenced by Link’s righteousness and courage and became more willing to stand out in the real life.

Laura is the only female participant in my research, and she described herself as “a introverted and shy girl who cannot tolerate ambiguity or risk”.

Sometimes, I just close my door and stay by myself to think some questions, and I prefer work individually because I don’t like other people into my life. I am a person that cannot tolerate ambiguity or risk. [Before I decide to do something,] I need to make sure that I can finish it within my capability. That is why I like playing easy games and easy modes of games, which makes sure that I can achieve the final goal.
Laura’s identity is strongly linked to her favorite avatar, a robed traveler in *Journey*. Laura described this robed traveler as a “strong, perseverant, and lonely” pilgrim heading to some holy land. “They [the game developers] purposely designed roads and passages very difficult to get through, so when you walked on the road, it was always up, up, and up. You had to try very hard to push [the buttons] harder to go up.” Laura recalls, “For the whole process, the pilgrim was suffering, no enjoyment, always suffering, and always trying to get to the final point. After getting to the final point, some unknown power brought the pilgrim back to the start point. To some extend, it was just like our life”. Being touched by her avatar’s toughness and perseverance, Laura spent much time on playing this game and tried her best to play through it even though it was the most difficult game she had ever played. After playing *Journey*, Laura said she began to understand her avatar in the game and became more patient when she met difficulties in the real life. Also, through playing the online version, Laura found a way to work in a team without letting others into her life.

Sol likes to think of himself as more of an intellectual person who likes to approach problems intellectually and try to solve puzzles in that way even though he is big and strong from the outside. Sol’s favorite avatar was the *Amazon* he used when he was playing *Diablo II*. According to Sol, “I put so many hours into that character, and it is the one in which I invested the most”. Sol described the *Amazon* in the game as a “very strong, brave, independent person.”

Although the *Amazon* was not really muscle bound, she was very intelligent. Her abilities took a lot of skills, and she used planning and tactics to defeat enemies as opposed to brute strength, but she could fight
with monsters and spirits in melee weapons, which was obviously an expression of identity that was very symbolic and literal.

Sol acknowledged that there were many similarities between his own identity and the Amazon’s identity, including being resourceful and approaching problems intellectually. “And I think that this character is like my stereotype about what women are like, like the fact that she is vulnerable in some ways, just like I am vulnerable in some ways. She uses planning and tactics to approach problems intellectually just as what I do in my study and work.”

Group three had two members, Sorin and Napoleon, who both thought that the avatar’s identity and their own personal identity were totally different from each other.

Sorin is a very easy-going person and usually gets along with people so all his coworkers usually like him, and he will do favor to people as long as it is not completely out of his way. Sorin doesn’t want to follow the mainstream, and he will definitely choose unordinary ways to achieve his goals as long as they are not going to hurt himself or anybody. Sorin’s favorite avatar is Cloud in the Final Fantasy series, a character that is different from Sorin himself. Sorin described Cloud in the following:

The first thing you recognize about Cloud is his spiking hairs almost like Z in Dragon Ball (a Japanese comic), and I grew up watching Dragon Ball so that was kind of interesting. Second thing is probably his most noticeable gigantic sword called the bustard sword, and that sword has quite some stories behind it. Cloud dresses up in a former military uniform, and I guess he is a mercenary now but he used to work for some giant corporation. He is a very calm, cold, and cool character, and he really
doesn’t know anything about his past, and I think he has some amnesia, and he is very strange and hard to connect with, and he is very alone and he has no friends, and you don’t know about his life.

Differences abound between Sorin’s identity and Cloud’s identity. They are two types of personalities quite opposite to each other: one is warm and friendly while the other is cold and isolated. According to Sorin, there were two main reasons that his liked Cloud. First is that he didn’t want to follow the mainstream to play as righteous characters, and he always chose to play evil characters. Second is that he enjoyed being as someone different from himself in the game. Sorin thought video games gave him opportunities to be evil without doing harm to anyone.

After asking the level of similarity between of the avatar’s and the player’s identities, I delved deeper by asking the participants whether they had changed their own identities to imitate their avatars or vice versa. Two participants acknowledged that they had changed their own identities to imitate their avatars and five participants believed that they just made their avatars like themselves. Moreover, four participants acknowledged that video games played a very significant role in the process of their identity building.

In group one, both Kira and Stukka said they made avatars in their image. According to Kira, “I usually make the avatar more like myself rather than make myself more like the avatar. I think the avatar in MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game) is kind of the reflection of the player. I always try to make my avatars exactly the same as myself, but it is not easy to do that”.
Stukka held the same opinion by saying “I think I make avatars close to me, and I think my identity and my avatar’s identity are almost perfectly identical. In *Star War: the Old Republic* for example, I made that character as close to me as possible, and I made all the choices that I would make in real life”.

Stukka indicated the role video games play in his life in the following:

Indirectly it is a part of my growth as a person, because I started video gaming since I was very young, and I have no way of knowing what kind of person I would have become without video games. In high school when I was in the prime of my *World of Warcraft*, I had to almost mature faster because I was playing with people much older than me, and just being with people a lot older than me I think it helped me mature quicker and learned how to interact with people older than me. I grew up in a small town where it was like all people in that town were middle class white people, so that video games brought me the first diversity by introducing me to some online games. Because we lived so far from each other when I was in that town, it was so difficult for us to go over to a friend’s place and play games so that I was usually just solo and it was hard to interact with other kids, but video games, especially online games, offered me a platform where I could play, interact and make friends with other kids, so I think without the Internet and video games I wouldn’t have become as outgoing as I am now.
In group two, Craig and Sol explained that they made avatars to match themselves, but Laura admitted that the robed traveler had such a great impact on her that it was reflected in changes in her own identity.

Craig didn’t think avatars had influenced his identity very much, but the avatars did offer a kind of identity mirror:

It provided me and other people an opportunity to look at yourself. I think I probably make the avatar more like my identity. It doesn’t mean my avatars and characters just copy what I show to the world, there are aspects of myself that I would hide from the normal world, maybe I can let my avatars express that. So it is not who you think you are, it might be what you want to be. But certainly, choices I make in games reflect my values, and they reflect the way I make choices in real life and reasons I make choices.

Sol explains:

I don’t know how much I try to make my identity line up with my characters’, I think, in terms of like moral choices stuff, I often just do what feels the best to me, which is like a reflection of me personally. Rarely in a game does a character present a personality that you want to personally simulate, if that is a character you really like, it is not necessarily because they have opinions you agree with, so it’s hard for you to find that as a role model I guess. So I more often change the character to match me than I match the character. It is interesting in games when you have more control over the character; sometimes the character ends up
being very different from you, because you want to explore alternate personalities, but in the case of a game where the character is largely preset, you tend to find one that you sort of relate to already. And as the game goes, you create the narrative that allows you to relate to it more, as even the character is written specifically to relate to you.

In terms of video games’ influence over identity, Sol says: “it is hard to say definitely whether it has changed my identity or not, but I think it teaches me a little bit about my preferences with good and evil, because that is the core dichotomy of the character”. Sol gives this example:

If you are building your renegade character, there are lots of decision trees where you are like “yea, I feel really good about this decision” and sometimes you feel like “oh, that is a really difficult moral choice to make in the situation.” I don’t want to pick the renegade choice, I am doing this because this is the renegade character, and I am supposed to, in order to do this course, make this choice.

Laura believed the avatar could help players to find the completed identity and narrated her experiences as such:

When I was playing this game I just tried to think things from his or her perspective, I mean I tried to feel what he felt and think what he thought. I think I have modified my personality, my choices, to get close to [the avatar’s identity]. I thought that robed traveler was a part of me, and before that I never thought I was a quiet person, and I thought I liked parties and friends, but that robed traveler really touched me profoundly
and I felt we were the same type of people, and the robed traveler let me recognize myself more clearly, and now I realize that I don’t have to pretend to be an outgoing girl and don’t have to socialize if I don’t want to. So the experience in *Journey* made me think that it was ok for me to do something by myself. After I played this game, that night I cannot sleep. That was the truth, I kept thinking about the whole scenario, the whole thing and the whole game. Maybe it changed a little bit of my value of life, which made me think that life was just about suffering. So all you need to do is trying your best and enjoy your journey.

In group three, Napoleon and Sorin held different views. Napoleon made his avatars in his image while Sorin attempted to mimic some avatars in ways of doing things. According to Napoleon, he “won’t have a major personality change after playing video games”, and he never thought he was really impressed by any avatar or how that avatar acted. Napoleon believed that avatars just represented what players wanted to be. Hence, he has shaped all his avatars’ identities. In terms of video games’ influence on identity, Napoleon says:

> I would want to say no, but a lot of it could be unconscious stuff and they [players] have no idea that it actually affects you. It could be just like while you are playing this game, it goes through your mind and you don’t even think about it. I actually don’t know whether it did or not, but if I had to say so based on my own experiences, I want to say no.

Sorin also reasoned about the influence of video games on identity:
I think I want to become the avatar in video games. Sometimes the way they talk and the way they joke, sometimes you find a very funny character in video games that you want to copy their wording, and some characters are created to be like that. In terms of personality, I think we can only copy or mimic their physical things, and I think everyone has their emotional things and it is pretty hard to change and try to copy someone else, it is pretty weird to do so. Physical things are more easy to copy, I remember when I was playing Street Fighters, my brother and I were really silly back then and we pretended to be those characters in the game doing upperscuts and rolling around.

Sorin’s comment show that video games did influence him but he also admits that he believed he was influenced by video games very marginally. As he explains: “it does help me think and sometimes in real life in a situation where you can think back to those similar situations that happened between two characters, not necessarily like killing anything”.

In this section I found that the players’ identities and the avatars’ identities were connected to each other, and those two identities interacted with each other. Usually the player’s identity dictates what kind of avatar players will choose and what kind of personal characteristics the avatar will have. Under some circumstances in which the avatar identity is iconic and idolized, the avatar identity in turn may affect the player’s identity.
Two Worlds

This section will explore how players share their lives between the real world and the virtual game world, and show the players’ level of involvement in both worlds. Three questions were discussed with the participants in this section: 1) To what extent do you get immersed in the virtual world? 2) To what extent do you get involved in your game community? And 3) Do you think you have a different identity in the virtual world?

Being immersed in the virtual game world insinuates that players care about their avatars rather than just control them, and sometimes players feel that they were placed in their avatar’s position rather than sitting in front of a computer. With the exception of Craig, all participants affirmed that they had the experience of being immersed in the game.

Kira expressed his opinion as such:

I think that depends on the game. Mostly when you play a MMORPG, you are playing and acting the avatar, and then it is easier for you to get immersed. Well, I think it is more like when the story of the game is fixed and you have no other choices, then you are more like an observer or controller watching the game instead of getting in to it.

Laura expressed her opinion in the following:

I think I was immersed in the avatar when I was playing Journey, definitely, and at that time I was that robed traveler. You can feel the loneliness and something you cannot feel in our daily life, which makes me feel like I am this person [avatar]. I usually choose to play by myself, which means I don’t like to be disturbed by others when I am playing
games, and I don’t like to cooperate with others, which also makes me distracted.

Napoleon said he was feeling immersed in the game “in the sense that you make decisions and those decisions affect how the game plays out for you. When I play video games, usually I am not very immersed in the story so much, for me I think I just feel immersed in the game itself, I mean all the graphics, sounds, and environments”.

Sol expressed his opinion and experience about being immersed in the following comment:

The experience of it for me is that the video gaming is about a lot of escapism, and being a part of that character’s story allow you to focus on what their lives looks like instead of what your life looks like, so I really enjoy being immersed in that character, and sometimes the character isn’t actually the full reflection of you, you might play a completely renegade character in Mass Effect, and you are not really an evil person, but because you are playing out that character, it allows you to feel like you are in that person’s shoes, even you don’t personally identify with that person. I really enjoy spending hours playing on my own through those games, especially those RPGs where you are more related to a character. I guess it is really a good escape for me, living someone else’s life for a while, or getting involved in a challenge.

Sorin also expressed his vision of immersion in a game:

I think I am usually immersed in the video game, and actually I don’t really play video games in which I don’t get immersed. If I am not
immersed in it, I would probably get bored about it. I pretend I am in that video game when I play it. For me, playing video games is not like just having a good time, and for me, it is more like an escape from reality.

Most of the games that Stukka played were MMORPGs, which made it easier for him to get immersed in games and avatars, because as Kira said, “you are playing and acting the avatar”.

Craig was the only participant who chose to be an observer or controller, explaining his preferred approach as such:

I think for me I played generally as the observer, because for me playing games is not like a social thing. Gaming is something I do by myself; maybe it is because I don’t have any brother or sister and I usually play alone. Another reason might be that I always keep being a rational person, and that is why when I pick an avatar in the game, I like doing some research to find out which one is the best rather than just pick my favorite one.

The second question in this section was about the involvement in the game community. I discussed this issue with the participants because I wanted to know whether being immersed in the virtual world and being involved in the real world were related. My hypothesis was that the more one gets involved in a game community, the less chances one has to get immersed in the virtual game world, but my participants showed that these were unrelated by giving different examples and experiences. Two participants, Craig and Laura, are not involved in a game community and they also preferred playing
alone, while the other five participants all believed that having a game community was important.

Craig explained his preference for not joining a game community:

For me, it is easier if I don’t have to cooperate with other people, I don’t have to coordinate with them. There was also some forums and other online communities, I would read some stuff, but I never posted anything, but I would read about new games and imported games, so I thought I was part of that community but not active. I was really into playing games solo, and I never really had a big group of friends. I think I have never been competitive about games because I was never in a group of friends playing competitively.

Laura was the other participant who did not have a game community and was not interested in joining one. She explains her choice in the following:

Playing alone is also one of the reasons I like this game. I don’t like to work with other people, and I prefer to work individually. For example, I prefer individual work to teamwork in doing presentations so that I can make sure everything is under my control. When I have to coordinate with others, I have to make sure I meet their needs in terms of time or strategies. And I don’t like conflicts between me and other people, even though I try my best to avoid conflicts. If I have to work with others, I will do it, but during the process, I will try to be not so aggressive, just try to be one in the team instead of the one of the team. Conflicts always happen when someone makes mistakes, when you make a mistake, others might
blame you, you have to take the responsibility of the final failure. If it is teamwork, you need to take others into consideration; you need to put yourself into others’ shoes. In that case, you cannot be so self-centered. And I am very self-centered.

Kira expressed a different perspective and talked about why he liked his game community:

I have a couple of really good friends online, and we still keep in touch now and sometimes we still play some games together. I began to play with those guys when I was playing SD Gundam, and at that time we were in the same guild and we were one of the top teams in that servers. To me, what really matters is whether I am playing with my friends rather than what game I am playing.

Here is Napoleon’s understanding about what a game community meant to him:

I had a lot of friends on World of Warcraft, and we had some team speak software where we could chat with my friends. I made some pretty good friends online, but I never actually talked to them after I stopped playing that game. There was actually one time where I wanted to spend $15 to reactivate my account for one month, just wanted to go and talk to these people again, but I realized that if I did that, I would probably be pulled back to game by those friends, and I found it was hard to quit a game when you were in a game community.

Sol’s opinion was that everyone needed a game community, and he described how the game community helped him with playing:
You really need a community to help you jump ahead levels and do things faster. And now my perspective of video games is much different, now I start to hang out with a group of people that are all more competitive about gaming, and having some social pressure and encouragement appears to be really good at the game. I feel like you often need that community support to get rid of something. There was a really good community for Starcraft, in which my friends that I play Magic the Gathering (a trading card game) with are involved. Even though we don’t play 4VS4 or anything like that, it is much easier to get a group of people together watching you play, making suggestions, coaching you and talking about your strategy and stuff like that. In order to be a good player, you need to commit a certain around of time to practice to be really good at games, but it is easier to do when there are other people doing it with you.

Sorin didn’t say too much about the game community because he usually just played with his brothers. For him, a game community occurred naturally and gaming was more of a family activity than a hobby.

Stukka played a lot of online games and thus had a particular point of view on the importance of a game community:

I have met several groups of friends, and lots of these friends I have already lost contact with since I stopped playing the game or moved to a new server. Now lots of players I played with are real life friends, like my girlfriend and her brother, and then there is like 5 or 6 of us that are still in contact from my hometown and we all played together for a long time. I
remembered when we were playing *Halo* we made a group of 4 of us. And we named ourselves the Sergeant Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club band and named ourselves after the Beatles, and we actually got pretty high ranked.

The final question in this section was whether players thought they had a different identity in the virtual world. This second identity could be seen as an escape from the real world so that participants could achieve their dreams that cannot be achieved in the real world. Discussing and learning about why participants wanted to escape from the real world and what their dreams were help us to understand their identities.

Craig explained why his game identity was similar to his real identity:

I think they are pretty close to the same. No, I don’t think I have a different identity in the virtual world. I think I am more comfortable in always being myself. In games I usually do decisions in same the way I would do in real life, and I am not like some people who want to get an opportunity to do things they cannot do or they wouldn’t normally do in the real world.

Kira also believed that his virtual identity was the same as his own identity, but he saw himself as living in those two worlds simultaneously, which meant that both worlds were no different in his eyes.

No, I don’t think I have a different identity in the virtual world, and even if I had one, they are probably the same. To me the online virtual world is no different from the real world, because those players that I talk to and play with are real people, and I treat these two worlds the same. What I mean is not that these two worlds are exactly the same, what I mean is that
I treat them in the same way and I behave, think, and talk in the same way in those two worlds.

Laura expressed that she had a different identity in the virtual world:

Yes, I think I do have a different identity in the game world. Sometime I would like to try some very different characters in games. I feel excited about playing all those characters. Usually when I play RPGs, I wouldn’t stay with one avatar for a long time, I will change between different avatars. Sometime I just create a very ugly avatar with an evil personality; sometime I would create a beautiful avatar with a very good quality. I think my identity is combined with some element from the real world and some from the virtual one. In the game world, I want to be a character who basically wishes to achieve success by herself. And also others can recognize her achievement. I need an audience, but I don’t need team members. In the real world, I have to have friends and family members who would listen to my happiness or sorrow. I need someone who can share my emotional feelings. But in the game world, you can just play by yourself.

Napoleon also believed that he had a different identity in the virtual world, a place of escape where he could enjoy doing something different from real life. Here, he described who he was in the virtual world:

Yes, I think I have a different self in the game if I can get into it, just for the fun of it. Every time I finish a game, I will go back and do everything totally differently, and I just want to see how it feels. For example, when I
was playing *Grand Theft Auto*, I am just going around and shooting everybody, just being a terrorist.

Sol shared why he thought people had different identities and made a very specific comparison between his real identity and his virtual identity:

I certainly feel like I have a different digital identity. Because your digital identity is the reflection of whom you *want* to be more than who you *actually* are. If your digital identity was found by other people, and if you interview other people about what your digital identity was, I think their impression of you would be different than what your impression of yourself is, because digitally you are just the words you choose in the conversation you get involved in, which are more of a reflection of your preference than your actual exterior persona. In general I feel like what I present are more opinionated, more confident, and more assertive than I am in real life, because there is that distance between you and those online. I would get very angry online when someone makes some stupid mistakes that causes us to lose, but I won’t get angry when I play with someone I know. In games with RPG aspects of building a character, often time on my first play through, I will just do what I feel is the best call in that situation, sometimes that is paragon and sometimes that is renegade, which are definitions in *Mass Effect*. On my 2nd and 3rd play through, I often try to make a fully good character and a fully bad character, and I certainly have had both good and evil characters in a game and really related to different aspects of both of them.
In a seeming contradiction of desires, the character that Sorin said he wanted to be in the virtual world was opposite to who he was in the real life. Sorin described the evil character he wished to be and reasons why he wanted to be a bad guy:

Yes, in the game I am completely far from my personal identity. It would be something different just so that you could do something you normally don’t just to see what effects would it be. Sometimes you know how their real life effects could be, so you cannot do that kind of stuff in real life because there would be serious consequences, but in video games you can do whatever you want so it would be a little bit unordinary. For the first person, I would be Sephiroth because he is sort of Cloud in a way but much darker version of Cloud, and he also carries a gigantic sword and he also has a crazy hairstyle. I think he gets attitude and he is really cool, he is a badass, and you don’t know much about him, he is very mysterious as well. He doesn’t care about anything, and he can kill someone not even care about it, and I think what is special about this character is the way he talks and the way he moves and doesn’t care about anything. I think it is similar to what I would want to be in the virtual world.

Stukka also believed his virtual and real identities were the same and gave his reasons in the following:

I think my game identity is very close to my real life identity. I do believe I have a virtual identity and a real world identity, but they are so similar, like I am not making a new character all the time, and I am not trading people differently online that I would in real life, so there is a identity
there in the virtual world, but it is the same one as the one in front of you. I was saying that because somebody who doesn’t know me and I don’t know them online, and they would probably see my online identity there.

These interview excerpts show that being immersed in the virtual world and being involved in the game community are often not connected. Players might find themselves immersed in the virtual world and involved in the game community at the same time, and there is no problem living in those two worlds at the same time. Finally, we see that there are various factors that could help participants develop a different identity in the virtual world, for example escape from reality, being fascinated by some characters in the game, or the reflection of some hidden sides of their real identity.

Gains
This final section of the chapter describes the impacts of video games on participants’ lives. By asking participants about what they gain from playing video games, I wanted to get both positive and negative ideas about what the video game had brought to their life and identity. Participants talked about gains in different ways, and what they gained from playing video games focused mainly on four categories: friends, skills, values, and experiences.

Friends
How players value their game friends can reflect their attitudes towards their game community and their level of involvement in their game community. Two participants, Kira and Sol, speak of friendship as one of their gains from playing video games and show a high level of involvement in their game communities.
Kira thinks the most valuable thing he gains from playing video games is friendship. “Now I don’t play games with those friends any more, but we still often chat online and share joy and fun. I know it is easier to make friends in real life, but those friends I made online are really connected to each other since we have spent much time together, and I think we have much in common.”

**Skills**

Skill is the most common thing that all my participants gain from playing video games, and four participants admitted that they have gained a certain skill thanks to video games. Gaming skills and other skills that people might acquire while playing can also reflect their competitiveness and the value of competition for their identities. The more skills they acquire the higher their competitive levels are, and four participants, Craig, Kira, Sol and Stukka, who acquired gaming and other skills while playing games, all show an appreciation for competition in their identities.

Through playing RTS (real time strategy) games, Craig learns “quick decision-making, quick planning, and the actual manual mechanical skills to execute plans, and to adapt [his] plan as [the] opponent changes.” Usually, RTS games give players very little time to think and require players to react to different stimuli simultaneously. As Craig explains: “I think video games train me how to do actual brain-hand connecting fast.”

Kira acquires a lot of gaming skills by playing first person shooting games. “After playing tons of first person shooting games I can do several headshots in one second or even less, so I think I get really fast reflexes and brain-hand connection from playing games.” Though Kira knows that quick reactions are good, he does follow by saying: “it
is not that useful in my real life, maybe it only helps me when I do some sports, and I don’t think it affects my real life very much.”

Sol says that he learned many computer abilities, such as fast typing, through playing *Starcraft*. “I was a slow typist, but in *Starcraft*, you have to communicate with your team members and control game units simultaneously, so you need to type fast and learn game codes that can help you communicate more easily.” Sol believes that he would type much slower if he had not played as many video games. “Also the experience of playing games on the computer teaches me a bunch of how the computer works, like how to do a graphic setting, how to update hardware to run games smoothly.”

Like Sol, Stukka also believes that fast fingers and clear communication are important skills that a player should acquire if he wants to be competitive. “When there is a fast pace game happening, you don’t have much time to say this or that, so you have to have quick reactions.”

**Values**

There are many ways that players can learn values during the process of playing video games, for example, perseverance by overcoming a tough opponent, justice and nobility by playing a righteous character, or tolerance by playing an evil character. By studying the values that players develop from playing video games, we may begin to understand what video games bring to players’ lives and identities.

Craig thinks he learns “a level of determination, hard work and perseverance. The nicest thing about a game is that if it is well designed, it will finally reward you for hard working and persistence. I think these are both things that translate to my working life and my daily life.”
Sol also thinks that perseverance, planning ahead and staying focused are abilities that he learns from playing video games and that can help him in real life, both at work and in his studies. Sol explains how these values he acquires from playing can help him in real life:

Staying focused is very helpful in my real life work. As a writer, I know it is much more challenging if I want to work or do some reading in a noisy and distractive environment, for example on a bus going somewhere or after a tough game, I will suppose that I am in my office and I’ll try to stay focused on my work. Then my brain will tell me “this is my writing time,” and I am going to be productive.

Sorin often idolizes game characters and imitates their features, and he says he has learnt a lot from these characters. For example, he often uses the characters’ stories to encourage himself:

Sometimes watching the character in the game going through hardships can make me feel encouraged, because those hardships they face in the game always remind me of what happened in real life. Even though I know the stories are made up by designers, I still think those characters’ ways of thinking and doing things in the games are encouraging and inspiring. If you can follow along with it, you can see it rubs off on you and make you stronger.

Another value that Sorin learns from game characters is tolerance:

Some video games offer me opportunities to play some evil guys, most of the time I can tell what is good and what is bad, but sometimes those bad
guys’ plans seem like reasonable even though they look like crazy and might hurt someone. Sometimes those characters are called ‘bad guys’ just because they have different ideologies than normal people, which make them minorities. So after putting myself in some minorities’ shoes, I start to understand why we should tolerate others with different views or cultures.

Experience
Experience is also gained from playing video games. In fact, playing video games itself is a kind of experience, the experience of living in a virtual world.

Craig thinks playing video games is a safe experience in which players can see the consequences of their decision without taking any responsibilities or risks. “A well designed RPG or a well designed adventure game lets you make choices and will present you consequences for those choices, and I think it is good because you could see consequences of the decisions in that safe environment without hurting anyone.”

Laura thinks playing video games is an experience of being a dreamer and expressing some hidden parts of your identity. “In games, you can achieve your dreams and become whatever you wish to be in real life, for example, a princess or a boy. You can also express some dark side of your identity in the game, like being a bad guy with some dirty secrets. I think it is an experience where you can fulfill your dreams and try a different kind of life.”

Similarly to Laura, Sorin thinks video games give him a very good opportunity to experience the role of “bad guys” so that he “can try to understand their ways of doing things.”
Stukka thinks it is an experience in which he can learn more about people. “In *League of Legends* there is a bottom line where you and your friends can work in pairs, so it is 2 VS 2 in that lane. Depending on whom I am playing with I can learn more about them. I find that Carly, my girlfriend, is very reserved and defensive when she plays, but some other friends are very aggressive. So I think I can get some inside on people by playing with them.”

**Summary**

From the interviews with the seven participants, we can see that participants profit from playing video games in different ways. Although varied, the gains are all connected to the participants’ identities, the relationship between themselves and avatars, the participants’ levels of immersion in the games, and the levels of involvement in game communities. For example, participants who said that they gained friendship showed a higher level of involvement in their game communities compared to participants who did not mention friendship as a gain. Also, participants who said that they acquired values from characters and avatars seemed to have more similarities between their own identity with their avatars’ than participants who did not mention gaining values from avatars. Indeed, as the participants in this study share their vision of the impact of video games on their lives, different perspectives bring about new questions for further research.
Chapter 5: Analysis

The concept of identity development as seen through videogame play is much more complex than I could have imagined or understood before I began this study. At the very beginning, I knew that identity was a profound and abstract issue for researchers to study. So I narrowed down my research field to the sociological identity, which concerns a person’s self-presentation and social perception, and aspects of a person that make him or her different from others.

According to Fearon’s (1999) study, sociological identity contents two parts, personal identity and social identity. The personal identity represents how individuals express themselves to the society, and the social identity represents how society and the outside world perceive individuals.

Based upon those scholars’ studies, I explored the influence of video games on identity from two aspects, personal identity and social identity. From the aspect of personal identity, Gee (2003), Thomas (2007), and Palfrey & Gasser (2008) elaborated that players are actually creating and constructing new identities when they create avatars in video games or on online social networks. Besides the creation of new identities, game playing also contributes to the merging of the players’ identity and avatars’ identity. According to Filiciak (2005), the subject (player) and the “other” (the onscreen avatar) do not stand at the opposite sides of the mirror anymore. From the observer’s view, no matter how often youths create new avatars and change appearance or attributes of their avatars, players and their avatars are more bound to a single combined identity. From the
aspect of social identity, Squire (2008) focuses on how players can transform from culture and knowledge consumer to producer through playing in a creative way without just following game rules. Turkle (1995) also believes that in an Open-ended game, players are authors and creators as well as consumers of media content.

Based upon those researchers’ previous work and my own experiences, I identified two themes from my data: 1) Awareness of influence of video games on identity; and 2) Impact of consoles and other media/devices on the influence of video games.

In this research I have two roles, the outsider/researcher and the insider/gamer. As the researcher, I have a better understanding of identity than my participants, so I have a more in-depth understanding of my participants’ words and stories and detect the influence of video games on them from an outsider perspective. As the gamer, I have been playing video games for more than ten years, so I know better how my participants feel about video games and what video games mean to them, and my own experiences can resonate with their experiences.

**Awareness of influence on “identity”**

**Participant perspective**

In the interview with all my participants, I found it was difficult to detect the influence of video games on the identity, both personal and social. When asked about the influence of video games, participants mainly focused on something at a surface level, for example, their behaviors. Among my seven participants, only two of them actually mentioned the influence of video games over their identity, while the five were not aware of any influence on them.
After analyzing my data, I think the influence of video games on identity is largely unconscious so that it is not directly obvious to gamers or those around them. As Napoleon said in the interview, “a lot of it could be unconscious stuff and people have no idea about whether they are affected or not”; most players are not consciously aware of the influence of video games while playing and they don’t think about the influence after gameplay. However, players often recall the game in their heads or watch playbacks after the game, but they seem to do this only to check where they have misplayed rather than find the influence on their identity. In fact, none of my participants had ever considered that playing video games influenced their identity development. Even after I discussed the relationship between playing video games and identity development with them, only two thought that playing video games was relevant to their identity development, while the rest still denied it with a variety of reasons.

As the oldest participant, Craig says that video games ‘in his time’ were not as immersive as they are now, which he believes is the reason why he was not aware of any influence from game playing and avatars. Kira is the youngest participant who grew up playing more immersive video games than Craig did, but he is still not aware of any influence of game playing and avatars. Kira thinks other media, such as the Internet, social networks, and smart phones distract him from video games so that he doesn’t feel as attached to games as an earlier generation of gamers. Napoleon says playing video games did nothing to his identity but cost him a lot of time that he could spend on studying. Sorin thinks game playing and avatars only had impact on his behaviors; for example, he likes mimicking his avatars’ voices and dressing styles, but his identity, he reports, remains unaffected.
**Researcher/outsider perspective**

From an observer’s awareness, I find that those participants who are not aware of the influence over their identity merely focus on themselves; in other words, their real world identity. In fact, when players play as avatars and characters in the game, they are experiencing a new set of principles, values, and ways of understanding. Game playing and avatars influence players’ identity in a way by giving them opportunities to express themselves to a different world and different audiences. From the moment players choose to play an avatar in a game, he or she accepts the avatar’s principles, values, and ways of understanding, which form their new personal identity. During the time of playing, players are expressing their new personal identity to the world and audiences in the game. Though most of my participants are not aware of the influence of game playing and avatars on their identity, as the observer, I still discover the connection between video games and their identity development by analyzing the data. Based upon my findings and my own experiences, game playing and avatars have implicit but profound influence on both their personal identity and social identity. On the personal identity aspect, game playing and avatars offer my participants multiple angles to understand themselves; and on the social identity aspect, open-ended games and game related movie-making have changed the way in which society perceives players.

**Influence on Personal Identity**

First, game playing and avatars give players a chance to have multiple identities. By playing as different characters and avatars in the game, players can experience different identities. In a particular game, one character or avatar represents its unique identity, because each video game has its own background story and world settings. When players play as an avatar or a character in a game, they are experiencing a new
identity according to the background story and the world settings of the game. For example, I once played as the warrior in *World of Warcraft* and the barbarian in *Diablo III*. Both warrior and barbarian belonged to the close combat type and had similar abilities, but the ways I played and engaged in these two roles were very different. When I was playing the warrior, my position was the protector in a team to shield the other team members from damage. As the protector, I had to be ahead of the whole team so that leading was also one of my jobs. Compared with the cautious and responsible warrior, the role of barbarian was more uninhibited. Because of the different world settings, a barbarian didn’t have to care about his or her team members, and what I had to do was kill my enemies as fast as possible. By playing those two different avatars, I experienced two different identities. The warrior one is cautious, responsible, selfless, and strong, while the barbarian one is reckless and free. So based upon my own experiences, I want to find out whether having multiple identities is a common phenomenon by searching similar experiences from my participants.

Even though games a decade ago were less complex and immersive, Craig still has his favorite character, *Link*, a young adventurer dressed in green hoody in *The Legend of Zelda*. When Craig played *Link* in the game, he accepted *Link* as his new personal identity that is brave, and righteous, which affected Craig’s perception of himself. Similar to his Asian mother, Craig likes to be in the middle and doesn’t like going extreme, as he says, “I always choose something in the middle, because these middle guys can do everything a little. I think it is partly like an Asian thing that you don’t want to stick out, and you just want to be normal”. However, being the brave and righteous *Link* meant
Craig often had to stick out in games. In real life, the game experience sometimes encouraged him to fight for first place instead of staying in the middle.

Stukka reports that his gaming experience in *World of Warcraft* helped him develop a mature identity that is more responsible, disciplined, and sharing in the virtual world, and forced him to mature faster than his peers in the real world. When Stukka started to play *World of Warcraft*, he was just a high school student, but the online players he played with were much older than him, and most of them were adults.

“Playing with those adult players allowed me to learn adults’ principles and values and behave like them,” says Stukka, “such as discipline, responsibility, and sharing”. In the online gamer community, Stukka learned how to listen to the team leader, implement his orders, and share rewards with team members, which he couldn’t experience in his real life. Playing with adult players online not only helped Stukka to acquire a mature virtual identity, it also helped his real identity to mature faster, which shows up in the way he generally gets along with others.

Sol enjoys playing different avatars in role-playing games, and sometimes he might have two opposite avatars. “Sometimes it is paragon and sometimes it is renegade, which are definitions in *Mass Effect*. On my 2\(^{nd}\) and 3\(^{rd}\) play through, I often try to make a character that is totally different from the first play through”, recalls Sol, “so I will have a good character and an evil character in the same game and I am really related to different aspects of both of them”. In this way, Sol can experience two different personal identities in the same game context. Both the good character and the evil character have influence on Sol’s personal identity, which might make him become righteous, or evil, or half righteous and half evil depending on different situations.
Sorin also enjoys playing two different characters in the *Final Fantasy Series*. His two characters, *Cloud* and *Sephiroth*, have almost the same outlook on life but opposite identities. “*Cloud* is a hero but *Sephiroth* has a evil heart. They look like twin brothers in the game but in fact they fight for the opposite sides. I cannot say which one I like better because I am a righteous person but sometimes I want to play the bad guy”. Both these two characters have parts that Sorin appreciates. When Sorin is in the *Cloud* mode, he praises virtue and punishes vice, but when he is in the *Sephiroth* mode, he fights for the evil side and plays against *Cloud*. As more and more players wish to play one game in different ways and review the whole story from different angles, games like *Mass Effect* that allows players to build two different avatars are becoming more popular, which offer players opportunities to experience and experiment with multiple personal identities.

Secondly, having multiple avatars and characters might result in the merging of different personal identities. When players go through the game as their avatars, they use the pronoun “I” to identify their avatars, which, according to Filiciak (2005), is the process of introjection -- the subject is projected inward into an “other”. Filiciak (2005) argues that the subject (player) and the “other” (the onscreen avatar) do not stand at the opposite sides of the mirror anymore -- they become one by sharing one bearer of consciousness. According to Palfrey & Gasser’s (2008) study, the mergence and combination of youth players’ identity and avatars’ identity happens constantly and unconsciously, and no matter how often youths create new avatars and change appearance or attributes of their avatars, from the view of the observer, they are more bound to a single combined identity. The participants in my study were not aware of this phenomenon, however, from the perspective of the observer, I realized that no matter
how may different avatars one player has, those avatars and the player are connected to
create a much fuller picture of the individual, spanning a greater period of time (Palfrey
& Gasser, 2008).

Again I want to use my own experiences to explain how the mergence happens. I
once had two avatars in two different games, the warrior in *World of Warcraft* and the
barbarian in *Diablo III*. The warrior was cautious, responsible, selfless, and strong, while
the barbarian was reckless and free. When I was playing one of those two games, I
couldn’t stay as one avatar, and those two personal identities presented by two different
avatars unconsciously interacted with each other through my play. When I was playing
the cautious warrior, I couldn’t get rid of ideas about advancing rashly and being reckless,
and vice versa. Even when I was not playing, I still preserved those characteristics that I
learned from my warrior identity and barbarian identity, such as being cautious,
responsible, and adventurous. The mergence of different personal identities gives me a
fresh perspective to understand the complexity of identity. Some of my avatars’ identity
traits, such as being cautious, responsible, and adventurous, can be integrated into my
own personal identity through the mergence of identities. Based upon my own
experiences, I try to find commonalities from my participants.

Laura, one of the participants, has a deep feeling about the mergence of identities.
She says, “Usually after playing a touching game, I can not help thinking about the whole
thing my avatar experienced in the game, and I will put myself into the avatar’s shoes so
that everything she experienced in the game becomes my own experiences.” Laura thinks
she absorbs some characteristics from avatars she plays in the game, such as being
persistent and extroverted. Before playing online games, according to her narratives,
Laura was an introverted and unsociable girl. But her online gaming experiences offered her an opportunity to experience a friendly and extroverted personal identity, and now Laura has less pressure to fit in groups and communities. Based upon her narratives about her past and present, I can say that the introverted Laura and her extroverted avatars together form Laura’s personal identity.

Stukka is another good example of the mergence of different personal identities. In previous parts of my analysis, I mentioned Stukka’s experiences of two personal identities, one as a high school student, and one as a mature gamer in online video games. The experience of being a mature gamer online doesn’t only make him more able to easily fit into some online player groups, it also lets him become much more mature than his peers, which I think is the result of the mergence of two personal identities. For example, as a team member, Stukka learned to remain disciplined in a group mission, to be responsible for his mistakes, and to share rewards with other team members. The interaction between a young student and an experienced and mature gamer makes Stukka integrate those adult values, such as discipline, responsibility, and sharing into his own personal identity as a high school student.

Sol also experienced the mergence of different personal identities by playing two different avatars in one game. Based upon his gaming experiences, Sol explains, “If you want to build a renegade character after playing through the whole game with a paragon character, you will find lots of places in the game where it is hard to make decisions. Your previous paragon experiences will definitely affect your renegade character.” According to Sol, when his renegade character is going to make some immoral decisions, those values and principles about being righteous and kindhearted will try to hinder him
from doing that. I think once a player plays an avatar in the game, he or she accepts this avatar as part of his or her personal identity that will affect the next avatar he or she is going to play. So after playing both righteous and evil avatars, players might become half righteous and half evil, or be conflicted, due to the mergence of personal identities.

**Influence on Social Identity**

In addition to games influencing players’ personal identities, they also have an impact on their social identities. Open-ended games and machinimas (computer animation) help transform participants’ social identity from culture receiver to culture producer.

Traditional Conception of Youths as Culture Receivers

According to Prensky (2001), in school youths are knowledge consumers who just receive information; because school education is built up upon scores and tests, leaving little space for adolescents to produce their own culture and explore unknown fields. Based upon Prensky’s study that society perceives youths’ social identity as knowledge consumers, I focused on video games’ influence over youths’ social identities, which helps them to become culture and knowledge producers.

According to Bauman (1994), our postmodern lifestyle is featured by lack of cohesion, the postmodern individual’s personality is not well defined, its final form is never reached, and it can always be manipulated. Filiciak (2005) argues that we “receive no implied form of our ‘self,’ but, instead, we construct it incessantly. Today we repeatedly change our appearance, hobbies, professions, and our residences; everything is transient and temporary” (p. 94). These two researchers’ studies suggest that contemporary individuals’ identities can be manipulated and transformed, which allows
me to move further in developing deeper understandings of the influence of video games over transforming identities.

How Open-ended Games and Machinima Transform Youths to Culture Producers

Squire (2008) indicated how open-ended games could help youths to produce their own culture and knowledge in his studies:

In Open-ended games, learning resembles a process of coming to understand a system, experimenting with multiple ways of being within that system, and then using that system for creative expression, usually enacted within communities of other players. The game structure is less about reproducing a particular way of thinking and more about creating spaces for knowledge creation and discovery. (p. 171)

Squire (2008) identified Open-ended games as a system in which there is no particular rule for players to follow so that players can liberate their thoughts to re-create using materials provided by the game system. For example, in the Civilization series, players can use maps, models, and other necessary materials provided by the game to create their own scenario and share it with others. In that case, open-ended games provide a better platform for young people to unlock their talents that involve game design, game-related literacies, and game maneuvering. As more scenarios and game-related literacies are produced by youths, society should perceive them as culture producers rather than just culture receivers. By posting their works online to share with other players, those culture producers give other players ideas and materials for recreation, in which more creation and more producers will be expected and encouraged.
After analyzing my data, I find some of my participants have experiences of doing game related creation, and those experiences have helped them to become culture and knowledge producers.

Sol has experiences of playing and making his own flash games, which he is still very proud of. After a short period after getting access to the Internet, Sol started to play flash games online. He played those flash games on a website called Shockwave where people could post their self-made games. Sol was inspired by playing others’ games and started to build his own. “I remembered that I started to learn how to use Flash and made a few very simple mini games. I posted them on Shockwave and hoped someone would like them. During that time I kept going to see rankings of my games and messages left by those who played them”, Sol recalls. Shockwave is very similar to an Open-ended game system where players can create their own games and share with others. By building those flash games, youth can not only learn Flash and computer skills, they also re-create knowledge and become producers. On one hand, youths consume and receive knowledge from others’ sharing; on the other hand, they create and produce new knowledge.

Like Sol, Stukka also has similar experiences of making game related creations. Instead of designing his own games, Stukka makes game movies called machinima, a type of computer animation that is often made by using materials provided by video games. Stukka videotapes his avatar in World of Warcraft and adds dubbings to make mini movies. By controlling their avatars in World of Warcraft to travel, talk, fight, and celebrate, Stukka and his friends use cameras to record their avatars’ moves and make up a story. Then they post their works on game forums and YouTube to share with other
players and hear feedback. It is easy for those machinimas to make *World of Warcraft* players feel related because they are familiar with scenes and characters. Open-ended games like *World of Warcraft* offer youths a big platform where they can find all materials they need to make game movies. For those *World of Warcraft* players, it is easy to make a fantastic story, and all they need are just a camera and a good plot.

With the rapid development of game technology, open-ended games will provide youths more and more materials and opportunities to build self-made games and machinimas. As gamers are constantly creating, distributing and modifying their own games and game-related literacies, it is difficult to say they are just consumers (Sanford, Merkel, & Madill, 2011). The experience of designing game scenarios and making machinimas makes it easy for youths to produce their own culture and knowledge. Moreover, as an emerging area, video games draw a lot of attentions to youths’ work so that it is easy for people to abandon their traditional perception of youths as culture receivers, and perceive them as culture producers from a new perspective.

**Impact of consoles and other media/devices on the influence of video games**

The rapid development of social media, new emerging media, such as the Internet, smart phones, and social networks, have had great impact on the influence of video games over youths’ identity. Video games nowadays are facing fierce competition; the Internet and social networks divert youths’ attention from video games to other social media. Additionally, mobile games on smart phones, compared with traditional video games, are smaller, cheaper, and portable so that they are becoming more and more popular with youths. Living in a world with so many choices and distractions, youths
nowadays may not be as attached to video games as they were, which is reflected in my participants in my research.

In my research, I found there are some particular differences between younger participants (18-22) and earlier generation of participants (23-28), such as the way of playing and their attachment to video games. The earlier generation of participants have stronger attachment to video games and would like to invest more and time and money into playing than those younger participants. In order to explore the reasons behind this phenomenon, I will compare the eldest participant, Craig, with the youngest participant, Kira. By comparing and analyzing their gaming experiences, I want to reveal how new social media affect the influence of video games over youths’ identity development.

Craig started playing video games in the early 1990s when the Internet was not widely spread and people were starting to use non-smart phones. Video games at that time were playing an important role in youths’ leisure time. Even though there were not many games, youths were very obsessive with this newly emerging entertainment. According to Craig, some games were so popular at that time that almost every kid was playing them, such as Super Mario Bros, Donkey Kong Country, and The Legend of Zelda. Those games gave Craig and his friends such great memories that now they still talk about their gaming experiences with those games. In order to treasure and preserve those memories, Craig builds up a storage room where hundreds of games, game consoles, and game related products are sorted by different categories. According to Craig, “there are a lot of memories tied to these items, every time I go through my collections, I can recall some memories and stories attached to those old cases and boxes”. Craig values physical game products because he thinks those discs, cases, and boxes
could carry his emotions towards games. “For my time, games were sold in stores rather than downloaded online. I remembered I used to go to all game shops in Victoria to find some very popular games. It was very popular back then for players to collect physical game products, and my friends and I spent so much time and money on pursuing them,” Craig recalls.

The youngest participant, Kira, is 18 years old and he has a different gaming experience from Craig. Kira started playing video games in the early 2000s when more and more people had access to the Internet and started to replace their landlines with new smart phones. Even though video games in the new millennium were far more immersive than those in early 1990s and experienced a full bloom with many masterpieces, for example *StarCraft* in 1998, *Half-Life* in 1998, and the first 3D MMORPG *Ever Quest* in 1999, Kira is not as obsessive about video games as Craig because he does not seem to feel any particular attachment to those games.

Kira represents a new generation of players who don’t have particular attachment to certain games and wouldn’t like to invest too much in playing video games. According to Kira’s gaming experiences, he has played lots of different types of games, but he cannot stay at one game long before he gets bored and moves on to another. Compared with Craig, Kira spends less time and money on video games.

Through this research I have come to recognize the effect of emerging social media in two aspects. First, emerging social media change the context of which the earlier generation of players, like Craig, saw the development of video games from the original *Nintendo Entertainment System* to personal computers. Games at that time were not as perfect as they are now, as well as their mechanics and graphics. However, as a
newly emerging entertainment, video games at that time were so attractive that many
players were immersed in them immediately. As a old-school gamer, I still remember the
first time playing video games on a Nintendo Entertainment System, and that playing
experience was so amazing that I almost quit all other things in order to have more time
playing video games. The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the blossom of the video game
industry. It was a time when mobile phones and personal computers were not widely
spread, let alone to the Internet, smart phones and social networks. People at that time
didn’t have as much choices of entertainment as they do now, so it is understandable that
players at that time were so obsessed with video games. With strong obsession with video
games, those earlier gamers were willing to invest much time and money on games and
going from one game shop to another just to find their favorite games. Their obsession
with video games and strong attachment to video games are determined by the context.

When the younger generation grew up to an appropriate age for video games, the
context was different. Now, when they want to play something, they have more choices
than their predecessors, for example, besides typical video games they have games on
smart phones, the Internet, and emerging social networks. Unlike their predecessors, they
don’t have to stick to a few games, and they could move on to play newly released games
or something other than video games when they are bored of one game. In this new
context, it is difficult for someone to stick to one game and play it for a long time. As
new products keep coming, their obsession with one thing fades within a few days, and
so they don’t have particular attachment towards certain games.

The second impact is that the emerging social media make youths less and less
absorbed and concentrated, which is also related to the context but happens within youths’
identity. Growing up in a context with so many temptations and distractions, for example, smart phones, numerous video games, and social networks, the younger generation find it difficult for them to concentrate on one thing for very long, because their attention is easily distracted by new things. As Kira says, “I never stayed at one game for long because there are some many good games waiting for me to play”. As attentions of young players’ minds become more and more contested, video games are changing too. Now video games are becoming portable, social, and disposable, and many popular mobile games are free or cost less than one dollar. It is no coincidence that the change of young players’ identities matches the development trend of video games; in fact this trend is possibly the reflection of the change of identity. On one hand, cheaper, easier, and more portable video games make it difficult for players to stick to one game; on the other hand, the younger generation of gamers don’t have the same connection to games, and those cheaper, easier, and more portable games exactly meet their needs.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Nowadays video games are not as novel as they were two decades ago, and ever since the day video games came out, many scholars and educators have been delving the secret behind that flashing screen. Around the issue that whether playing video games is helpful for learning or a waste of time, countless discussions and debates have been raised. However, very few studies have been done on the relationship between video games and youths’ identity, which I think is a very significant issue and also one of the reasons I chose to do this research.

As a youth, I think the issue of youths’ identity is a subject that is worth studying, because it is a highly complex area and there are many disagreements about it. One of the most notable disagreements is that how youths express themselves to mainstream society is always disconnected from how mainstream society perceives them. Young people tend to show themselves to mainstream society as energetic, creative, innovative, and passionate. Mainstream society accepts all these traits of youths, yet when it comes to important matters such as education and employment, society would like to pay more attention to youths’ disadvantages, such as being inexperienced, impatient, and informal. Mainstream society still holds views that youths’ identity should be assigned to traditional roles, such as children at home and students in public, however, now young people have the resources and ability to change the image they show to the outside world, and they also eager to let their voices be heard and their identity be objectively perceived.

As a gamer, I have special attachment to video games as many other gamers do in the world, so I have sought to justify video games for all gamers from a perspective far more profound than ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. I want to explore and analyze what influence have
video games enchanted on me after so many years’ playing, and I wanted to know whether or not other gamers are influenced in the same way I am. After analyzing my own experiences and my participants’ data, I realize that video games influence how youths perceive themselves and how they are perceived by society. From the personal identity aspect, youths can experience multiple identities through playing avatars in the games, and those avatars’ traits, such as being responsible and righteous, can be integrated into youths’ own identities through the mergence of different identities. From the social identity aspect, youths are given resources and opportunities in open-ended games to do culture and knowledge re-production, which makes mainstream society recognize them as culture producers.

To conclude, this research has focused on the relationship between youths’ identity and video games, which hasn’t yet drawn enough attention among academia. It also has an important role in speaking for youths and gamers, which are two minority groups whose voices are easily ignored.

**Implications**

The purpose of this research was to explore the influence of video games on youths’ identity. The review and analysis of the data collected from my participants has brought me to a few conclusions, each with serious implications.

First, studying youths’ experiences of multiple identities may help parents, teachers, and the public understand why youths need video games in their lives. Through playing avatars in the games, youths have the experience of multiple personal identities. Video games offer them opportunities to have at least two identities at one time, their virtual identity in the games and their real identity in reality. Traits of their avatars in the
games, such as responsible, righteous, and adventurous, have impact on youths’ own personal identity as they become immersed in the game and accept their avatars’ beliefs. Youths may be more like their avatars and finally adopt those traits into their own life through the mergence of different identities. Though some of my participants weren’t aware of the mergence, however, from the researcher’s perspective, mergence and combining youth players’ identity and avatars’ identity happens constantly and unconsciously, and no matter how many different avatars one player has, those avatars and the player are connected to create a much fuller picture of the individual, spanning a greater period of time (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Since youths and their avatars often merge into one identity, playing video games, or to say playing as part of themselves, becomes part of their lives.

Second, studying the transformation of youths’ social identity contributes to the awareness that the way in which mainstream society perceives youths should be re-evaluated. According to Prensky (2001), youths are culture knowledge consumers who just receive information from schooling, which leaves little space for adolescents to produce their own culture and explore unknown fields. However, video games provide youths with materials and opportunities they need to produce new culture and knowledge in the form of, for example, home made scenarios and machinimas (computer animations). As more and more youths devote time and energy into designing game scenarios and making machinimas, mainstream society should take a fresh look at youths’ social identity. Moreover, my research also challenges the traditional view that playing video games is a waste of time. If youths re-produce culture and knowledge
based upon their experiences of playing video games, as what I found in my research, how could we still view playing games as a waste of time?

**Considerations**

During the interviews there were some questions that I did not ask and some points that I did not delve into, which in hindsight I wish I had. These questions were about negative comments on video games and the security of the virtual game world. I think those questions should have given me important information to further my understanding about the gamer identity. The point I did not delve into was one of my participant’s negative comments on his playing experience. When Napoleon was doing his narrative, he blamed his not doing so well in school to playing too much, and he also said if he quit playing earlier and spent more time on studying, he would go to a better university. I was familiar with that view because my parents and teachers once said the same thing to me, so I did not think it was a point worth delving into. But when I was reviewing the data I realized that I just ignored an important idea. What if other participants have the same feeling? What if there are lots of players regret playing when they grow up? As far as I know, many players were told by their parents or teachers that playing video games was just a waste of time when they were at school. And how do they think of video games after years of playing? I think it is a subject worth delving into, but I can only hope I will get a chance to answer those questions in the future.

Another consideration of mine is that sexism and racism are making the virtual game world an unsafe place for female players. Video games, especially online video games, are safer than the real world for youths to experience different identities and create their own cultures; however, the virtual world is not safe for all players and its
security is still our concerns. For example, there is no law or punishment to stop sexists and racists bullying and humiliating female and visible minority players in the virtual world, which is an important reason why female players are not involved in video games very much as male players.

**What might be the next stage?**

Besides questions about the negative comment I missed, there are other improvements that I need to do in the future. First, if possible, I will use more varied methods of collecting my data instead of just recording their words; for instance, I will videotape participants’ playing while observing. When I was analyzing data this time, I found that words could not give me a full picture of what my participants said, and I could not feel their moods by just listening to their words. In addition, some of ideas and feelings could not be expressed clearly by words. For example, in the interview with Stukka, he was very excited about introducing his avatars, and he really wanted to show me his avatars and how he played on his computer. I was also deeply impressed by seeing Craig’s huge collections after the interview, which helped me a lot in understanding his special attachment to video games. So in the future if I still want to study video games, I will use cameras to videotape my participants’ playing and narrating to capture more information, which I think will help me further my understanding of the relationship between players and video games.

Second, I will recruit more female participants to collect a more balanced data. In my research, I found that Laura, my only female participant, provided me more information than male participants, because she had a better memory of her playing experiences and liked talking more, which also provided me fresh views and stories
different from those narrated by male participants. For example, Laura had a more delicate feeling about her avatars, and she had a stronger attachment to them. Another reason I want to recruit female participants is that females have different preferences in choosing games. For instance, Laura named some of her favorite games during the interview, but none of them I had ever played or heard of. After listening to her description of those games, I found they focused on simulations rather than combats, racing, or strategies that were chased by male participants. Considering that female players are important in the gamer community, I will recruit more female participants and listen to their opinions in the future.

In terms of the topic, my next research will focus on development trends of video games and their influence. As smart phones and Apps become more and more popular among young people, video games have confronted the biggest challenge and begin to make adoptions. Video games no longer just stay on big consoles; they have been transplanted onto mobile phones. Now it is easy to find the app version of many classic video games; however, it is some mini games that really draw attention, such as Angry Birds and Fruit Ninja. It is very hard to categorize those popular app games and traditional video games, such as World of Warcraft, into the same category, because they are much smaller, cheaper, and portable. In the last section of my analysis, I mentioned that app games are suitable for the young generation of gamers whose minds are contested by more choices. In my opinion, app games are products of our time, and they are changing our time in return. App games stand for a new style of life, which is different from the old one where people would like to spend a whole day playing video games. In this new style of life, people can play no matter when and where they are.
People can play when they are waiting for a bus or during the class break. In fact, people who are living in this new style of life enjoy playing a short time during the break, and most of them are on the run all the time and can not afford a whole day’s playing. I am interested in this new style of life and app games, and I want to explore the relationship between this new style of life and app games and in what ways could app games influence our lives.
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