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WHO IS POSSIBLE ONLINE? TECHNOLOGICAL AFFORDANCES AND SOCIAL NORMS SHAPING VISUAL AGENCY AND IN-GAME IDENTITIES

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Abstract: The article researches how identities are constructed online, highlights what frames identity (co)construction; what identities are possible, and thereby, *who* is possible online. In multiplayer online games, identities are shaped by (at least) two frames; the technological affordances of the game as well as the social norms of that particular platform (Ståhl and Rusk, 2020; Ståhl, 2021a). Here, this discussion is exemplified through empirical data from the multiplayer game *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive (CS:GO)* from 2017–2018. The research project had a player-centred design and is positioned as an ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). The data was collected in collaboration with a vocational school with an esports programme in Finland that the participants (17–18 years old, all identifying as men) attended. In a previous analysis of the material, we (Ståhl and Rusk, 2020) noted five tools for identity (co)construction. One of these, player customization, will be the focus of this short paper. The aim is to discuss visual player customization as in-game identity (co)construction concerning technological affordances as well as social norms through the lens of technomasculinity. Additionally, based on this discussion, the chapter provides some implications for future studies on visual agency in online gaming.

Keywords: in-game identity, identity (co)construction, visual player customization, affordances.

Introduction

Traditionally, videogames are white male arenas with limited access and representation for players identifying as women, players of colour as well as queer-identifying players (Corneliussen, 2008; Dietrich,

2012; Gray, 2018; Nakamura, 2009; N. Taylor, 2011; N. Taylor & Voorhees, 2018; T. L. Taylor, 2015; Witkowski, 2018). Current gender norms limit the association between "tech savvy, digital play, and femininity," (Harvey, 2015, p.137). While this norm does not necessarily reflect actual player demography, it does limit which players feel included and what identities can be constructed. Furthermore, on these platforms, acquiring competence can be limited by discourses of gaming or technology being portrayed as a masculine form of expertise; or *technomasculinity*. In the hegemonic gender structure in-game contexts, traits aligning with technomasculinity are promoted, while conflicting traits that connotate with, for example, femininity and queerness are not (Johnson, 2018).

Identities are here seen as plural, shifting and changing, but with enough stability to maintain their social function (Chilton, 2014) as well as continually (re)negotiated and constructed in social contexts (Banjeree and German, 2014). Further, Shaw (2014) distinguishes between identities and identifiers. Shaw notes that while identification as a concept is important, identifying with characters in games is not as straightforward as a female player automatically identifying with female characters. Thereby, sharing an identifier such as gender is not necessarily enough for identification to happen. I extend this distinction to another context, as here, the analytical focus is on the identities the participants construct rather than the identifiers or identity categories they inhabit. I employ the concept of identity (co)construction, and by placing the prefix within brackets, I do not claim that identity construction is not collective. Rather, based on the participants' activity within the data, I claim that the collective construction of identities can be seen as a continuum of being more or less explicitly negotiated. Correspondingly, I employ the term identity (co)construction. Additionally, these identities are also contextually situated and affected by norms and values from each community. While identity categories such as gender, race, ethnicity or sexuality are not my analytical focus, these categories were made relevant by norms in the online as well as the offline community the participants engage with.

Early studies on identity construction in games include Fine's (1983) work on role-playing games and Turkle's (1995) study on multi-user dungeons. However, the field can be considered fragmented (Ecenbarger, 2014) with a heavy focus on games with customizable avatars and/or narratives, such as RPGs and MMORPGs. These have been studied extensively concerning identity (see e.g. Gee, 2003, Corneliussen, 2008, Dietrich, 2012; Langer, 2008 and Sihvonen & Stenros, 2020), whereas research on identity construction within First-Person Shooters (FPSs) is limited with a few exceptions like N. Taylor (2011) and Voorhees and Orlando (2018). Avatars can be seen as "the material to work with" in a virtual world (TL Taylor, 2009, p.110). However, while the characters in CS:GO are not customizable (and thereby not avatars

according to Shaw, 2014), that does not equate with FPSs being without material to work with. After all, the first-person perspective offers high player immersion (Gray, 2018) and possibilities for constructing in-game identities through the players' "own eyes" (Mukherjee, 2012). In FPSs, identities, roles and competencies are typically (co)constructed through in-game communication; predominantly performed through voice and text chat. However, the focus here is on identity construction and visual player agency, in particular on weapon customization (see figure 1).

Fig. 1. Screenshot from the screen recordings of CS:GO and map Mirage. The participant is wielding an MP3 with the Bioleak skin.

Video games are "constituted by the images on the screen" (Rose, 2016, p. 88) and visual aspects of a game or video game graphics are topics often discussed by the audience (see e.g. Johnson, 2019). Despite their relevance to the gameplay experience, there is a limited academic discourse on the visual aspects of video games. This becomes especially apparent in comparison to the body of academic texts on visuality in social media. When using the Åbo Akademi University library search engine for digital papers (search done on the 29 of January 2021), 'social media' and 'visuality' resulted in 12 596 hits, whereas the corresponding number for video games was only 2 465. The limited academic discourse on visual aspects of video games tends to focus on game design and visual aspects of that process (see e.g. Salen, Tekinbas and Zimmerman, 2006). Further, the research on visuality from a player perspective is both limited and narrow in scope, as the existing research appears to be focused not on the in-game experience as a whole, but player representation and avatars. In an attempt to address these research gaps, both this short chapter and the texts that preceded it (Ståhl & Rusk, 2020; Ståhl, 2021a), offers insights into

in-game experience and identity (co)construction in an FPSs. This focus on the player's visual agency is informed by visual ethnography (Pink, 2013), where visual material is not considered *worthier* but rather *as worthy* as other forms of research material (Pink, 2013).

This study is positioned as a qualitative case study informed by ethnography or ethno-case study (Parker-Jenkins, 2018). The seven focus students volunteered to participate in the study through a teacher. The data consisted of seven matches and four scheduled interviews per team. The focus students recorded and shared their matches regularly with the researchers through a secure file sharing service. The design of the study was dependent on the students' engagement due to the physical distance between the researchers and participants. Regular meetings, held at their school, functioned as interviews and were recorded. Stimulated recall (Nguyen et al, 2013; Pitkänen, 2015) on relevant sequences from the screen recordings was employed during all interviews apart from the first, thereby providing the researcher with the participants' thoughts and comments on certain in-game situations. The research design is described in further detail in Ståhl & Rusk (2020) and the methodological implications are discussed elsewhere (Ståhl, 2021a); to educational video research (Ståhl, 2021b) as well as the practical ethical implications (Ståhl and Rusk, 2022).

Player customization
and technological affordances

While the tools for player customization in FPSs tend to be more limited than in RPGs, it does not equate with *no* resources for identity construction. In *CS:GO*, the players decide what weapon to wield each round. The player can either spend their in-game currency on a new weapon or play with one purchased in a previous round. Not spending in-game currency to save for a more effective weapon the following round is referred to as an 'eco-round' or 'economy round' (Liquipedia, 2015). In terms of technological affordances, this decision is affected by the side the team is currently playing; terrorists or counter-terrorists. The weapon selection does, to some extent, vary corresponding to the current side. For example, certain pistols like Glock-18 can only be purchased when playing as terrorists. Therefore, while playing as a counter-terrorist, the player can only get the pistol by picking it up from an eliminated opponent (Counter-Strike Wiki, 2019). The AK-47 (see figures 2-4), is available for both terrorists and counter-terrorists.

The technological affordance of weapon customizing in *CS:GO* does not impact the weapon's primary function nor its effectiveness, but solely the appearance. In the material, three types of weapon customisation were present; weapon skins, stickers and renaming weapons. Skins (see e.g. figure 1) affect the weapons' in-game visual

representation whereas stickers function as decals on a weapon (see figure 3). If a weapon is renamed, the weapon does not appear with the standardized name, but perhaps as "Pistol of Doom" for all players. Given the focus on visual agency, the discussion here is focused primarily on weapon skins and secondarily on stickers. Unlike renaming a weapon which is free for any player, skins are purchased with actual money and therefore have an economic value. For example, one of the participants claimed that he usually sold the skins he owned to buy games on Steam instead.

If they have no impact on weapon effectiveness, why bother spending money on skins? One participant mentioned that some players
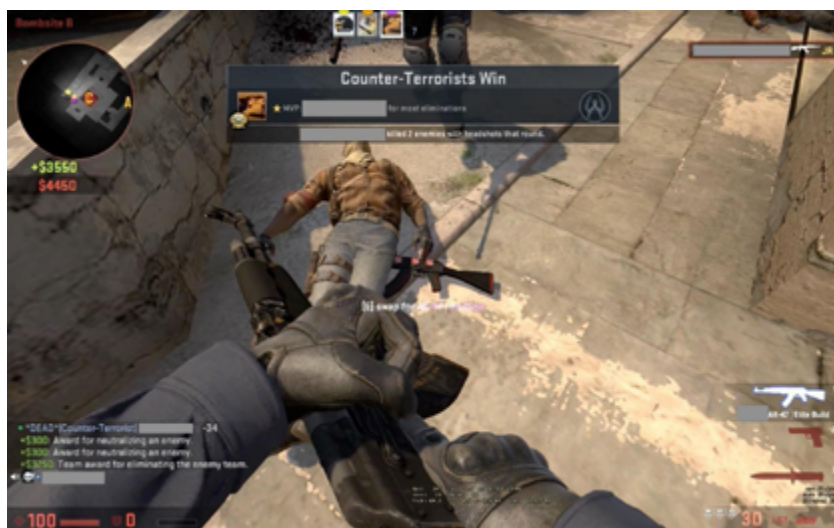

Fig. 2, 3. Screenshots from the screen recordings of CS:GO and the map Mirage.

feel more confident when they wield weapons that they find pleasing to look at or if they know that a certain skin has a high value. While the participant did not claim to be one of those players during the interviews, in-game he noticed an AK-47 (equipped with the Redline skin and several FaZe clan stickers, see figure 2) on the ground next to an eliminated opponent. As he was wielding the same weapon and the round was about to end there was no strategic advantage to picking up the weapon, but he did so anyway solely for the visual appearance (see figure 3). Similarly, he did get upset when an opponent picked his weapon with a skin despite the opponent already wielding the same weapon. Due to their customized nature, weapons with skins can be considered more meaningful for the owner, and as such, picking up an opponent's weapon with skin can be considered taking a trophy and potentially disrupt their gameplay. Accordingly, skins appear to be meaningful for the participants even though they do not impact weapon effectiveness. However, while the technological affordance of skins is available for purchase for all players, social norms dictate which weapon and correspondingly which skin can be used in-game.

Player customization and social norms

Customizing weapons offers the player different ways to modify their in-game experience and thereby (co)construct identities. The majority of player customization in the data aligned with individual and social aspects as motivation for buying in-game content, with few exceptions of economic rationale (Hamari et al, 2017). When asked about what kind of skins they liked, the participants claimed to prefer colourful skins. However, as the interviewer, I had previously provided the descriptions 'colourful' and 'elegant', so the participants might have preferred to former over the latter. On the other hand, this preference was also reflected among the skins wielded in the data. In the gameplay data, skins tended to be discussed in general terms, and specific skins were rarely mentioned. However, one of the participants noticed and commented upon another team member purchasing a particular skin. Additionally, he claimed to have made a profit trading with skins which sparked him to keep a tidy Steam profile with an almost storelike appearance. He thereby constructed an in-game identity of a 'skin connoisseur' that knew how much skin was worth.

Customizing weapons offers the player different ways to modify their in-game experience and thereby (co)construct various player identities; whether expressing taste, competence or sense of humour. However, identity (co)construction through player customization further appears to be influenced by technomasculine ideals as skins with masculine connotations tend to be the norm. All weapon skins used

in the data were either masculine or gender-neutral in terms of colour and pattern, with mainly military and 'tech' influences. The only visual feminine representation in the data is a female pin-up sticker on the otherwise gender-neutral skin *Point Disarray* (see Figure 4). This raises questions of identity (co)construction in *CS:GO* through weapon customization being a gendered activity. The male participants constructed several player identities in the material, however, we do not know if they did consider constructing an identity employing skins with feminine connotations. While such skins do exist as a technological affordance, the participants are presumably limited by social norms dictating masculine skins as preferable. The participants did not explicitly express such ambitions or concern regarding the prevailing norms of visual expression. However, that does not necessarily disprove the need for varying tools for visual identity construction. Rather, it highlights how players that fit the normative view of an ideal esports player, like the participants, can be unaware of or unwilling to question a power hierarchy that they are on top of.

Fig. 4. Screenshots from the screen recordings of CS:GO and the map Mirage.

Who is possible online?

While the norm of technomasculinity does not reflect actual player demography, it does limit which players feel included in a culture highly shaped by competitiveness. Prominent players tend to take their play more seriously (Rambusch et al, 2007) and the higher stakes, the less welcoming atmosphere for those not fitting the normative ideal (Sveningsson, 2012). Additionally, wielding weapons has traditionally been seen as a masculine activity and skillset, which is also the case in video games. Video games are centred around the concept of skill (Harper, 2013) and in *CS:GO*, in-game skill is highly interwoven with

weapon skill. In-game weapons with visual designs based on 'tech' or military influences can be employed to highlight the masculine connotations of warfare *and* technology simultaneously. However, employing a skin with feminine connotations in terms of pattern or colour scheme could potentially question the masculinity of the player. In a community where technomasculinity is the hegemonic gender structure, constructing a masculine identity is central to adhering to the norm. While solely a cosmetic change, using skins with feminine connotations could potentially, therefore, be seen as questioning or even taking a stance against the technomasculine norm. Further, both wielding weapons and in-game competency (Harper, 2013) are seen as masculine, however, emphasizing one's 'looks' has traditionally been seen as feminine. Additionally, the motivations for purchasing skins discussed here; economic and social values (Hamari et al, 2017), can be read as masculine and feminine respectively. Accordingly, as an activity, wielding skins can thereby be seen as both feminine and masculine, and I thereby advocate further research on purchasing and wielding skins as a gendered activity.

While this short chapter focuses on identity construction online through one particular tool in one particular game and how visual agency can be considered gendered, it raises important questions on the social norms dictating how technological affordances can be employed and by whom. From the perspective of visual agency, FPSs such as CS:GO offer other tools for identity construction than MMORPGs. However, to explore those venues, we need to see beyond identity construction in games as bodily presentations such as the customizable avatar. By claiming so, I do not wish to diminish the importance of customizability and representation among avatars and their complex relation to social norms in games and beyond. Rather, I advocate a perspective on identity construction that includes all tools that are meaningful for the player. Additionally, I wish to stress how these forms of identity (co)construction are connected to online and offline communities. Accordingly, the visual agency in games is at the same time both more than solely avatars and at the same time but one part of a larger toolkit for identity construction. I advocate more research, critical as well as empirical, on identity construction online, including all available tools — visual and otherwise, and how it is connected to offline communities (Ståhl, 2021). By empirical research on how technomasculinity is interwoven with online game culture, we do not solely analyse the connection between power hierarchies and gender structures online, but simultaneously question them (Ståhl & Rusk, 2020). That way we can support different stakeholders in making informed decisions for more equitable online communities.

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