Using Membership Categorisation Analysis to study Identity Creation in the Digital Game Dota2

Av: Jonathan Clinton
Handledare: Meeri Hellsten
Abstract
One aspect of the internet that has been discussed in relation to identity creation is whether we can transcend our physical selves when we enter an online environment, thus potentially creating the internet as a space where we could leave our bodies when performing our identity. The purpose of this master thesis is to investigate the accomplishment of membership categorization within the domain of online gaming and through it identity in an online gaming environment. This thesis argues that the discourse within Dota2 constructs the identity of the unsuccessful gamer as an outsider or deviant in terms of nationality, sexuality, and mental capability. Games of Dota2 have been observed and the interaction via the in-game chat system has been transcribed and analyzed using Membership Categorization Analysis. The study found that membership was not commonly assigned but when it was, it was associated with the incumbent being on one’s own team and performing lower than expected. Also, in the cases where categories were assigned to players, these were assigned to unsuccessful players (This interactive feature is supported previous research by Eklund (2011) and Linderoth & Olsson (2010) in that they created the game as male centric western European space. The expectations of a successful player were not accomplished in order to inform the identity creation process of successful gamers. The results suggest that identity in Dota2 is structured around a players displayed skill and that the identity created is often based on stereotypes associated with certain nationalities, genders and mental capabilities. The use of MCA offered a holistic approach to how identities were created in online gaming that allowed the researcher to approach the subject without any preconceptions as to what would be found. The study also showed that the use of MCA may be useful when it comes to identity creation within virtual worlds.
Foreword

In my second year of high school I discovered DoTA with one of my best friends. We played against each other, slowly learning the skills of killing creeps, killing each other, the abilities of the different heroes, and which items to buy. Soon I began playing online in the traditional team of five players, most of the time I played with strangers. However my interest in the game faded and lay dormant until a year ago when I was introduced to DoTAs successor: DOTA2 when my interest flared up again. Initially I played almost exclusively with friends but I soon began playing more with strangers, as I played I increasingly noticed that if players were selfish, reckless, or sometimes just not performing what was expected of them, they would be assumed to be russian, some players would even assume that all other players were russian until they proved otherwise. ”Russian” increasingly became an insult used against players, with this came stereotypical jokes about russian culture; potatoes, vodka, and freezing siberian winters. From these observations grew the aims of the current study: to investigate how identity is constructed between players in online digital play.

Background

In their article ”Social gaming, lonely life? The impact of digital game play on adolescents’ social circles” Domahidi et al put the number of teenage americans who engage in digital gaming at 97%, of these teenagers, 27% reported playing online with other people. Many of those who engage in online digital gaming reported making close friends within the gaming community, often directly through gameplay, despite this Domahidi et al point out that since online digital gaming is largely a spontaneous activity without formal rules, guidance from adults or goals related to offline skill development, increased participation in digital gaming may lead to antisocial behaviour (Domahidi et al 2014). Domahidi et al found an inverse relationship between time spent playing video games online and the number of confidants respondents reported having. Domahidi et al also acknowledges that different genres of online games may provide for different social relations being formed within the game. Domahidi et al do not discuss how these relationships are accomplished or how identity is accomplished when players are separated physically and have no way of relating to each other outside of the communication that takes place within the game.
In their article “Reviewing the need for gaming in education to accommodate the net generation” Bekebrede et al theorise that as students become more familiar with digital games in their everyday lives digital games will also affect their preferred learning styles and platforms for social interaction. Their results found that students preferred active, collaborative and technology rich ways of learning. The results were not limited to what Bekebrede et al called ‘the net generation’ (people born after 1982 whom would have grown up with digital games). Thus they proposed digital games as a teaching method to accommodate these preferred ways of learning (Bekebrede et al 2011). Both Domahidi et al and Bekebrede et al claim that digital games are a venue for social interaction and forming relations, however neither discuss how this interaction is achieved or how identity is assigned in an environment where people communicate via a screen. This study aims to explore how identity and social interaction is achieved in this environment.

In her chapter titled ”Cognition and Literacy in Massively Multiplayer Online Games” (Steinkuehler 2008) Constance Steinkuehler at the university of Wisconsin-Madison outlines five future areas that are of interest when it comes to research in digital gaming and why research into digital gaming should be considered important. Digital gaming is a push technology, it provides a jumping of point to other forms of information technology (IT). Adoption of home gaming consoles have preceded the adoption of home computers since they were both introduced to the market and today 83% of young Americans have a home gaming system in their home, 56% have more than two and 49% have one in their bedroom (Steinkuehler 2008 s.611-613).

Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs) provide a place where players can interact with each other through their digitally created characters (avatars) within the game but also outside the game through forums dedicated to the game, and fan-made media such as unofficial guides or databases dedicated to the game. We can thus see MMOGs as Discourses in the sense that they each constitute a group of people with common goals, interests, activities, and values. These groups also share rules for how to speak; which words to use, how to construct sentences, how to use emotes, and in turn how to interpret this language. These practices also extend beyond the game to forums and message boards (Steinkuehler 2008).

The five areas for future research as outlined by Constance Steinkuehler are:
1. Investigation into the complex ways in which the small, routine activities of participants constitute and are constituted by, macrolevel Discourses within the game.

2. Exploration into the cultural resources game community participants leverage in the authoring of identities, both their own and others within such virtual environments.

3. Research that examines how individuals are enculturated into such Discourses.

4. Analysis of the literacy practices within and beyond such virtual spaces and how they operate to create and maintain a coherent world of both practice and perspective.

5. Exploration of how the Discourse of MMOGs is caught up in conversation with other Discourses and participation in them is situated within gamers’ everyday lives.

(Stenkuehler 2008 s. 626-627)

These key areas of interest are also closely related to questions of education in that MMOGs provide and value certain practices and forms of literacy. These practices and literacies can then either conform with or be in conflict with conventional forms of literacy and practices that are valued in other parts of society, for example those taught in schools—mainly centred around the teacher-student categories (Freebody & Herschell 2010). In order to gain insight into the areas listed above Steinkuehler proposes the use of a number of methods, one of these is Discourse-analysis based cognitive ethnography. By examining the social practices of these communities we can gain knowledge of the Discourse in question. To examine these practices Steinkuehler recommends the use of ethnography; participating in the game, conducting informal and semiformal interviews with other players, taking field notes, and utilising video recordings. The data should then be analysed using a Discourse analysis. By focusing on utterances (spoken and written), and the use of language, we can see how these utterances invite to be interpreted in certain ways. Through analysing the language used we can gain knowledge of how a reality is constructed, how identities are constructed in this reality, how knowledge is constructed and what actions are valued (Steinkuehler 2008).

The Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) Dota2 provides players with a similar framework that allows us via Steinkuehler to see it as a Discourse in conjunction with the traditional MMOGs such as World of Warcraft. These similarities consist of interacting with each other through digital avatars, mainly through forums and user-created content outside of the game, sharing common interests, goals, values, and rules for how to speak within the game using specialised words. Dota2 has over 9,000,000 million unique players from all over the world, the game is also free to play, so there is no economic
barrier to accessing the game and/or discriminate against potential players, the game does however require a relatively powerful computer and a stable internet connection (Dota2 2014).

Introduction

For the purposes of this study the term ‘digital gamer’ refers to any person who plays digital games. This means that digital gamers can play anything from Candy Crush™ to Dota2. The term digital gamer was chosen partly to emphasise the digital aspects of the games discussed, often players are separated physically and may not even be located in the same country and only interact through their avatars and the in game chat. The term ‘digital gamer’ was also in part chosen as an alternative to the traditional term ‘gamer’ which is often associated with stereotypes. In her 2008 book *Cognition and Literacy in Massively Multiplayer Online Games* (2008) Constance Steinkuehler describes the world of Massively Multiplayer Online Games as a ”big D” Discourse; the social and material practices of a group who share a common interest, a language to talk about that interest, and a shared way of interpreting that language. These social and material practices are not limited to the games themselves but extended to discussions about these games on forums and message boards (Steinkuehler 2008). Viewing Massively Multiplayer Online Games as Discourses also allows us to approach the subject using Ethnomethodology. Ethnomethodology has foremost been developed to study social order as an ongoing accomplishment based on our everyday actions. In this study those actions are talk, when players use the in game chat to communicate with each other they can be seen to be accomplishing a social order. This study uses Membership Categorisation Analysis as research method, a sub discipline of Ethnomethodology (Linseståd 2006).

Linderoth and Olsson

In Världen som spelplan (“The World as a Gaming Arena” 2010) Jonas Linderoth and Camilla Olsson present MMOGs as a social space where relationships can transcend the normal interactive constraints that are placed upon individuals in society. The authors interview people who have been playing MMOGs for a longer period of time (in excess of several years). Many of the interviewees had, throughout their gaming practices made friends from backgrounds that were often culturally, socially, or ethnically different from their own. These friendships often transcended traditional boundaries delimited by age, nationality, and ethnicity. The authors point to the fact that in MMOGs what matters is
not what you look like or where you live but rather how good you are at the game. They then point to this as a factor which enables relationships to become accomplished across these boundaries. In these cases it can be argued that the games provide the players with the sense of (incumbency) i.e. to a category that may be denoted as a collective "we", in belonging to a group. In many cases the players had been gaming together for a period of time prior to their friendships were formed, many of them had belonged to the same guild or clan during this period (Linderoth & Olsson 2010).

Linderoth and Olsson’s study refers to negative social encounters in MMOGs as a feature of “gaming with strangers” and “language” as forming a barrier to a good social gaming experience. Many of the informants in Linderoth and Olsson’s study pointed out that gaming with people where there existed a language barrier between players often meant that it became more difficult, if not impossible to perform tasks that require a high degree of cooperation. One of the informants, Jens\(^1\) points to that when his Ultima Online server was moved to the United States and as a result received more Japanese players the Japanese players were ostracised for not understanding English and only speaking Japanese. Similarly Jens also encountered servers in the game DotA (Defence of the Ancients) with names like "Whites only" or "only Aryans", when you joined these servers you would frequently be asked questions like "are you white?" or "are you a Jew?". When performing poorly on these servers or making a mistake people on your team would often ask you things like "are you a negro? Are you Jewish as well?" (Linderoth & Olsson 2010 s.35-38).

Linderoth and Olsson’s study concludes that the reason relationships across these barriers are possible in MMOGs is because players are reduced to being just players where you are only judged on your performance in the game. There is however one exception to this rule which is gender e.g. female gamers. If a player is known to the fellow gamers as being a female, her gender is almost immediately made a topic for discussion. Being a male gamer is constructed as the norm and female gamers are constructed as something exotic and unusual. It is in fact not unusual for female gamers to have their gender questioned, they are often believed to be men lying about their gender. If their gender is not questioned, their competence within the game and motives for playing are questioned. They might be accused of only playing in order to receive attention from the opposite sex, or they are accused of being inferior in terms of skills or abilities to their male counterparts. Females are also sexualised in the sense

\(^1\) Jens is a pseudonym
that an in-game chat system will often either turn dirtier or cleaner when a female joins that chat system (Linderoth & Olsson 2010 s.48-53). Here we see that even though Linderoth & Olsson portray digital game worlds as a place where intercultural relations can flourish, there is an ongoing construction of gamers as male, Linderoth & Olsson don’t in any other way elaborate on how the identity of gamers is constructed in situ. Studying gamers identity creation in situ could inform us of how identity is accomplished through interaction between gamers themselves.

Aim

The aim of this study is to explore how players of the digital multiplayer game DOTA2 can be seen as being identified by their peers within the game.

Review of research literature

In the real world alot of our identity is performed through our body, either consciously or subconsciously through our actions. In digital gaming, identity is also performed, with the difference that our physical bodies are not present, instead the interaction with the game world is performed through an avatar. In this chapter I will review previous research that have discussed how identity performances in digital games have been interpreted by other players.

Gender construction in World of Warcraft

In 2011 Lina Eklund published an article on how gender is performed among female World of Warcraft (WoW) players titled ”Doing gender in cyberspace: The performance of gender by female World of Warcraft players”. In the study she assumes the perspective of Judith Butler that gender is a performed identity. In this sense gender is something that we perform through our actions. Here gender is not static but a process where there is no gender prior to our actions. From this perspective she then proceeds to interview eight female WoW gamers, all eight interviews focus on the women’s own experiences of playing World of Warcraft (Eklund 2011).

In WoW the players create their own avatar. Different avatars have different appearances and are able to interact differently with the game world. One of the choices in creating your avatar is that of the sex of the avatar, the sex of the avatar changes its appearance but not in the way it interacts with the game.
world. All the women interviewed in their study had chosen to create female avatars but for different reasons. But they all had one aspect in common: they chose to play as women because they themselves were women. Previous research in this field has found that women are more prone to create and play as an avatar of their incumbent gender in WoW, whilst the same is not true for men (Eklund 2011).

There is a strong male norm in WoW which has led some of the informants in Eklund’s study to chose not to reveal their gender outside of the game unless asked. One of the informants explains that she is afraid that were people to find out that she is a woman they would lower their expectations of her performance in the game, or not want to play with her. Her experiences have not warranted this fear, but many of the other informants claimed to have similar fears. Eklund claims that her informants showed two different ways of relating to and performing their gender in WoW, one was to use their gender to gain help and items from male gamers, the other was to fight for your right to be treated equally as a female. It was however observed that in order for the first strategy to work the male who you requested help from needed to believe that you were also a female offline (Eklund 2011).

Eklund maintains that depicting women as being in need of help and guidance when it comes to gaming is a way for males to retain their masculine norm within the game (Eklund 2011). Although many of them try to prove their worth as gamers, many of the women also adopt strategies to appear harmless. Eklund also highlights the fact that most of the interviewees had been introduced to the game via their boyfriends and initially played on their boyfriends computers and on their copies of the game, something which further allowed the men to act as gatekeepers and control the way in which the women interacted with the game. For the interviewees the way to achieve independence from the male yoke was to buy their own computer and copy with the game, with material possession came freedom (Eklund 2011). Eklund’s study showed how it is possible to see that online MMOG gaming can be seen to be created as a homogenous male space, it does not focus on how for example nationality or language may be seen to influence the creation of the same space.

Language skills and ethnicity as a cause for discrimination in WoW

In "Does WoW Change Everything? How a PvP Server, Multinational Player Base, and Surveillance Mod Scene Caused Me Pause" T.L. Taylor associate professor at the IT University of Copenhagen explores how player-produced culture has resulted in a culture of regulation and control. Taylor, a WoW
player herself experienced a change in how she perceived the game WoW when she stopped playing on a more homogenous American server and began playing on a more heterogeneous English speaking European server, where players also had a varying levels of competence in English. One of the first things Taylor wishes to draw attention to is the player culture revolving around language and nationality (Taylor 2006).

One of the first issues related to language that Taylor observed was when a group of players standing in close proximity were using the ‘say’- chat which is a proximity based chat channel in WoW to talk in Danish, the players were then reprimanded for not speaking English. This was not a one time occurrence, players would frequently be reprimanded if they spoke any language other than English, not only in public chat channels, but also in guild chats (chat channels exclusively for members of one particular guild). On a server where many players have English as a second language and various levels of proficiency in the English language. Partially as a response to this many guilds began recruiting only members who were fluent in English, however there also emerged a large amount of guilds formed around national identity, i.e. guilds for only Dutch or only poles, one of these guilds was the 'Serb Vanquishers’ a very active PvP (Player versus Player) guild who would kill all players of the opposing team they met, regardless of whether this action was warranted or not. Many players equated their play style with their ethnicity and ideas of what it meant to be Serbian based in their play style. The same is also true for many other nationalities although many of the remarks made were meant as humorous, e.g. ”The brits are always logging on drunk” (Taylor 2006 s.318-321).

As with the previously mentioned Serb Vanquishers, Taylor notes that some of these notions of the "other" gamer can escape from the original game and become a pan-game stereotype, capable of transcending traditional boundaries where there is usually very little intercommunication such as communication between teams or servers. One such stereotype that already exists in WoW is "the Chinese gold farmer”. Taylor offers two reasons for the emergence of the Chinese gold farmer, one being player frustration concerning real-money trade within the game, the other as a result of xenophobic ideas about what kind of players are ruining the game. The issue here is not simply one prejudice toward players of a certain ethnicity, but a situation where any player who does not speak English may at any time be assumed to be of a certain identity/ethnicity. In some games this problem has expanded to the use of certain avatars. For example the use of female dwarves in the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) Lineage II is so associated with the real-money
trade that it has become increasingly hard for players to choose such an avatar without being chastised for it. One way game companies try to tackle issues of this kind is to limit the servers a player can play based on region and language (Taylor 2006).

**Ulrika Bennerstedt and Ethnomethodology in Digital Gaming**

In two of the three articles comprising Bennerstedt's doctoral thesis (by publication) called “Knowledge at Play” she examines digital gaming from an ethnomethodological theoretical perspective. The articles titled "How gamers manage aggression: situating skills in collaborative computer games” and "Knowing the way. Managing epistemic topologies in virtual game worlds” are both studies of the MMORPG Lord of the Rings Online (LOTRO). One section on "How gamers manage aggression” focuses on how players approach aspects of the game that are violent or aggressive and how these aspects relate to questions of whether digital games foster certain kinds of behaviour and if that behaviour can be transferred to situations outside of the game. "Knowing the way” focuses on how people coordinate actions. The study focuses on Pick-Up Groups (PUGs) and what actions players have learnt to achieve a greater smoothness in gaming. Her study also approaches the question of transference in asking if the way players approach coordinating actions within the game has any bearing on similar practices outside of the game. Both studies use screen captured video recordings of the game itself as data and focus on actions and communication between the players (Bennerstedt 2013).

**Knowing the way**

As previously mentioned, "Knowing the Way” article focuses on cooperation between players in the MMORPG LOTRO and utilises screen captured video recordings to analyse the actions and communication between players in PUGs. PUGs are small (up to six players in LOTRO) and temporary (groups usually last between 30 min and a few hours) groups formed by players to accomplish tasks they could not achieve on their own, for example raiding a dungeon or killing a particularly hard monster. The PUGs that the authors analysed consists of groups where the players are strangers to each other and only utilise text typed chat to enhance their communication beyond what is achievable with the avatars alone (Bennerstedt & Ivarsson 2010).
In the discussion of the results Bennerstedt and Ivarsson claim that the collaborative tasks performed by PUGs had many features in common with a workplace in the sense that all players oriented towards achieving a common set of goals. These goals are achieved through practices performed by the players, competence in performing these practices is at first assumed and later confirmed through actions, these actions are performed digitally via the games interface. The study found that much of the intelligibility of actions were to be found in their sequential ordering, i.e. projection of what the next action will be. The sequential ordering of actions helped inform players of what events were expected to unfold and how the players should coordinate their actions without being told what to do in real time. When the chat system was used it was usually to problematise or discuss a players performance in relation to the goals meant to be achieved by the PUG. Bennerstedt and Ivarsson maintain that these chat interactions usually served to instruct or correct the behaviour of new players, so called "noobs" or "newbies" (Bennerstedt & Ivarsson 2010). The authors here claim that analysis of in-game chat would provide a good basis for analysing MMOGs, but that analyses that focus predominantly on in-game chat could become biased towards situations where the normal smooth running of things has broken down and that this could produce a skewed picture of MMOGs. In their conclusion the authors state that sequential ordering can be seen as the key aspect of coordinating actions in an MMOG as the participants do not rely on the traditional tools of physical bodily awareness or talk-in action to coordinate their actions (Bennerstedt & Ivarsson 2010).

**Ethnomethodology and how gamers manage aggression**

Bennerstedts second article has many features in common with the previous article, both utilise an ethnomethodological perspective and use screen captured video recordings of PUGs in LOTRO as their data source. The second article however features a direct focus violence and questions of the transferability of learned behaviours/knowledge within the game to situations outside the game. The study found that players needed to be proficient not only with how to apply procedures and techniques but also with a language that has been specialised for the situation (Bennerstedt, Ivarsson & Linderoth 2011).

Players in PUGs assumed different roles depending on the specialisation of their avatars. These roles come with certain rights and responsibilities, and it was expected of players that they were familiar with the responsibilities associated with their avatar, in addition to this players were expected to be familiar
with the technical practices associated with defeating that particular boss. Players were seen to be held accountable for their actions in regard to both of these aspects. Practices relating to these aspects were commonly found in how PUGs handled ‘aggro’ in boss fights. Aggro is an abbreviation for ‘Aggression’ and is associated with who the boss perceives as being the biggest threat and thus most likely to attack. The actions here were associated with handling the bosses aggression, in effect making sure the boss did not attack the wrong avatar, for example the more vulnerable avatar tasked with healing other party members. Players themselves have developed notions to distinguish between competent and incompetent players with regard to these proficiencies (Bennerstedt, Ivarsson & Linderoth 2011).

The authors note that in regard to LOTRO, the game that they studied, the notion of video games and violence is not a question of whether video games can lead to an increase in aggressive behaviour, but rather a question of how players manage a situation that can be seen to be full of aggressive behaviour. Accordingly, they also note that the proficiencies and knowledge associated with LOTRO are most likely tied locally to the game and do not lend themselves to generalisation about proficiencies associated with video games in general or outside video games (Bennerstedt, Ivarsson & Linderoth 2011).

In the expectations levied on players in PUGs in LOTRO we can begin to see how identity is accomplished in online gaming. In this case identity is associated with what is expected of a player in regards to them being familiar with the role of their avatar and that they were familiar with how to defeat that particular boss, here player identity is interpreted through a players actions within the game.

**Ethnomethodology and Membership Categorisation**

Ethnomethodology as a scientific field owes its current course to Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel made sure that Ethnomethodology was and always would be concerned with the fundamental principles of Sociology, and above all the issue of social order. Ethnomethodology differs from Sociology in one key aspect, it does not share the concern for social problems on a large societal scale, as was Sociology’s project as laid out by Emile Durkheim. It does not however share the smaller micro interests of phenomenology as laid out by the German philosopher Edmund Husserl. Ethnomethodology rose to prominence as an alternative to the programatic view that sociology should be more like the natural
Membership Categorisational Analysis (MCA) as a sub discipline to ethnomethodology was a result of Harvey Sacks work on Membership Categorization Devices (MCD). Sacks began his work that would eventually lead to the development of the MCD while working with Harold Garfinkel at the Suicide Prevention Center in Los Angeles and would eventually form the basis for his Phd thesis. The work focused on categories as a form of non-recognitional reference and argued that the use of category terms as reference was one of the most important forms of non-recognitional reference (Schegloff 2006).

**Membership Categorisation Analysis**

The practice of Membership Categorisation Analysis (MCA) goes back to the work of Harvey Sacks in 1963-1964. Central to the theme of MCA is the idea that there is essentially two ways of referring to other persons in making sense of interaction; ie. recognitional and non-recognitional. The former is a reference to another person in for example a reference to their proper name. It is however, the form of non-recognitional reference that are of primary interest to MCA work. In non-recognitional reference one of the most important practices is the use of category terms and the use of Membership Categorisation Devices (MCD), introduced by Harvey Sacks is the primary resource for their description (Schegloff 2006). MCDs are collections of categories that we can use to talk about a person, one example of such a category is ‘father’, that category in turn belongs to the collection of categories (or MCD) ‘members of a family’. Each category may belong to several MCDs depending on the context, for example: the category ‘student’ could belong both the MCD ‘occupation’ and the MCD ‘people found on a campus’. Harvey Sacks claims that all people can be said to belong to at least two different categories, and most people belong to many more. Sacks claims that people use the categories from one MCD in one situation and the categories from another MCD in another situation. The question thus becomes how do people go about selecting which MCD to use and why is this relevant? The answer is that these categories are inference-rich, when we label someone with a category they become a representative of that category, everything that is known about that category also becomes known about that person (Sacks 1989). Both Sacks and Schegloff offer the following example:

A: How old are you Mr. Bergstein?
B: I’m 48, I look much younger. I look about 35, and I’m quite ambitious and quite idealistic and very inventive and conscientious and responsible. (Sacks 1989 s.276)

Here, everything that is said after ”I’m 48” is a qualifier. Mr. Bergstein has just been assigned a category (people that are 48) and is qualifying that which is presumed to be known about him by virtue of him being a member of that category. Sacks called this practice M.I.R. Device (Membership Inference-rich Representative) (Sacks 1989).

Schegloff and Sacks maintain that the knowledge that accompanies a category can be called knowledge precisely because it functions as a form of common sense-knowledge. One form that this common sense knowledge regarding members of categories manifests itself is in Category Based Activities (CBA). Members of some categories are expected to perform certain actions, behave in a certain way, or have certain attributes. One example of this is if we see a police officer slam a person against a car and spread their legs we see them as performing the action of making an arrest, an action only available to members of the category police officers. This works the other way around as well, if we hear that someone has been arrested we hear that the person who carried out the arrest is a police officer, not a father, not a christian, even though these may also be true. We hear that the person carrying out the arrest is a police officer because it is bound together with the action of making arrests (Schegloff 2006; Sacks 1989).

When it comes to the warranting of reliability of observations via the application of Membership Categories (MC) there are two commonly applicable rules: 1) The economy rule and 2) The consistency rule. The economy rule holds that one category is sufficient to categorise any member of any population. The consistency rule holds that if a population is being categorised and an MC from one MCD is used to categorise one member from the population, then the rest of the population can also be categorised using that MC or any other MCs belonging to that MCD (Sacks 1989; Schegloff 2006).

MCDs come in several forms, some exist as groups, such as occupations (student, painter, engineer, etc), others exist as standardised relational pairs (student-teacher or mother-baby) so that when we hear the line ”The baby cried, the mommy picked it up” we hear that it is the mother of the baby that picks it up. We hear this because we hear both categories as belonging to the same MCD. another example of a type of MCD are two-set classes which consist of dichotomised pairs such as rich-poor, whites-non whites (Schegloff 2006; Sacks 1989).
Hearer’s and viewer’s maxims: In addition to the two above mentioned rules Sacks proposed the use of the two supplementary rules to aid in connecting action (CBA) and category (MC). The hearer’s maxim asserts that if you can hear (in the sense that someone has said) a category bound activity as being performed by a member of a certain category, then you should interpret the statement in that way. The viewer’s maxim differs in the sense that it is concerned with situations where some other person has not already articulated the connection between activity and category and states that if we can see an action as belonging to a certain category and the person performing that action as belonging to a category to which that action belongs, then we should see them as such. According to Schegloff these two maxims exist to keep the focus on how people are categorised as problematic (Schegloff 2006).

As we have mentioned previously all people can be categorised as belonging to at least two categories. We can thus refer to someone in at least two non-recognitional ways. The question then posed is how do we select which category to use as our reference. Schegloff here asserts that actual membership in a category is not sufficient basis for reference, but also that membership in a category is not even necessary for being categorised as belonging to a certain category. Which category we use as a reference is a question of which factors in situ are presented as relevant, they then inform our decision of which category to use (Schegloff 2006). Using Membership Categorisational Analysis to study how categories are assigned and which categories are assigned as forms of non-recognitional reference in online digital gaming we can see possible ways identity is created in MMOGs.

This study focuses on identity perception within MCA, what inferences do players make about other players who perform certain category bound activities or are assigned to certain categories? In this sense it is how the receiver interprets or infers from what is being said or what actions are being performed that is of interest.

**Description of the field**

Here I will give a brief description of the game that is the empirical field for this study, focusing on the general aspects of the game, but also aspects of the game which may be relevant for the findings of this study. Dota2 is the successor to the popular mod Dota for StarCraft which was later ported to the game
Warcraft 3. During its initial time as a mod the game went through a number of player made variants before they all came together under the name Defense of the Ancients Allstars. You start out as a hero in a team of five where the aim is to destroy the enemy’s ancient while they do the same to you. During the course of a match you will skirmish with the enemy team and their defensive towers in order to gain the upper hand. Dota2 boasts over 100 unique heroes which can be combined in almost an unlimited number of ways to ensure that no one match is like another. Each hero has at least four unique abilities that can be used to help defeat the enemy team. During the course of a match you will also battle with waves of autonomous ‘creeps’ (computer controlled enemies) sent out from each teams base to attack the opposing teams base. There are three main roads connecting the two opposing bases with each other known as ‘top’ ‘middle’ and ’bottom’. 
A map showing the digital landscape of Dota2 with the river dividing the two opposing bases. The Dire base is located in the top right and the Radiant base in the bottom left. The areas between main roads is known as the jungle and features many spots to ambush enemy heroes. The red area at the bottom right side of the river is known as the pit of Roshan and is home to a powerful creep who drops Aegis of the Immortal when he dies, an item which grants the wearer temporary reincarnation upon death.

During the course of a match the player will receive gold and experience points. Experience points are used to level up your hero thus making the hero and their abilities stronger. The gold can be used to buy
items for your hero to make it stronger. When a hero dies in Dota2 they lose a portion of the gold they have saved at that point and have to wait a period of time to ‘respawn’ (come back to life and help their team in the mission to destroy the enemy base). Most heroes in Dota2 are associated with certain roles, some are better at dealing large amounts of damage while others are better healing team mates or disabling enemy heroes, these roles are however very flexible and many heroes are capable of filling several roles at any one time. During the course of a match players have the possibility of either reporting or commending other players depending on their behaviour. Each player can only perform one of these actions once per match per player. Players can be reported for bad behaviour such as; communication abuse, ability abuse, and intentional feeding (a practice whereby you actively seek out your own death against the enemy team), or players can be commended for being; friendly, forgiving, teaching, or showing leadership. The practice of reporting or commending players is considered part of the games feedback system.

Dota2 is currently free to play meaning that there is no economic barrier for new players. The player can however purchase cosmetic items with real money within the game to alter the appearance of the heroes, or avatars as they will be referred to in this study. In may 2014 Dota2 surpassed World of Warcraft in terms of unique players (Gamespot 2014) and in november of 2014 had over 9,800,000 unique players. Dota2 features a professional scene where teams earn their living based on what they win in various tournaments in the game, the largest of which is The International, in 2014 The international sported a total prize pool of over 10,900,000 US dollars (Dota2 2014).
A complete list of all the heroes available for players to choose from organised by their primary attribute Strength, Agility, and Intelligence.

**Description of data collection**

The data for this study consists of transcripts from the all chat channel in DOTA2. The all chat is used by players to communicate between both teams, most of the data gathered this way is the result of some kind of breakdown which has interrupted the usual flow of the game and has thus prompted the players to reach out and communicate over the traditional team barrier. The breakdowns usually take the form of players performing either exceptionally well or bad, players having connection issues to the game, players intentionally abandoning the game, or the game being paused by a player. The data was collected by watching live games of DOTA2 and transcribing the chat communication in real time. The games have not been played by professional players and most games feature a line up of players who have no prior relation to each other. The games have been of the game type Ranked All Pick and have been played on the EU east and EU west servers, i.e. servers for people living in Europe. Apart from the above mentioned criteria the data has been gathered at random. Much of the data collected and presented below focus on how players construct the identity of other players by inferring aspects of their identity from actions they perform or categories they are assigned.
**Ethical considerations**

In accordance with the swedish scientific council I have taken the necessary precautions to make sure that the participants in this study are treated ethically (Vetenskapsrådet 2002). Owing to the fact that the players’ identities are already anonymised by the use of internet nicknames and the fact that obtaining consent would have been very labour intensive as most players only appear once in the data collected, consent has not been sought from the participants for this study. I have however opted to not use the players’ nicknames when presenting excerpts from the data but instead to use the name of the hero that player is player is playing as, this is also the most common way for players to refer to other players recognitionally.

**Results**

I will here present three representational excerpts from the data gathered and subjected to an MCA analyses. As a textual cue, the letter in parenthesis at the beginning of each line indicates which team the speaker is playing for, i.e. Radiant or Dire. The text in bold has been added as have been the notes by the author. To protect the identity of the players (Vetenskapsrådet 2002) I have chosen to refer to the name of the hero they are playing instead of their online nickname, this is also the most common way for players to refer to each other.

**Excerpt 1:**

1: (R) Legion Commander: ta
2: (R) Legion Commander: destroyed
3: (R) Legion Commander: items
4: (D) Phantom Lancer: (angry emoticon)
5: (D) Dazzle: it’s nice
6: (D) Dazzle: he got pt
7: (R) Legion Commander: He bought it
8: (R) Legion Commander: fter attacked his items
9: (Templar Assassin buys back)
10: (D) Dazzle: XD
11: (R) Legion Commander: gg
12: (R) Legion Commander: report
13: (R) Legion Commander: ta
14: (D) Dazzle: ta <3
15: (R) Legion Commander: pls pls pls
16: (R) Legion Commander: psl psl
17: (R) Legion Commander: report him pls
18: (R) Legion Commander: FUCkING SHIT
19: (R) Legion Commander: SHITTEST GUY IN THE WORLD REPORT HIM PLS
20: (R) Legion Commander: Why
21: (R) Legion Commander: 30% of
22: (R) Legion Commander: russians
23: (R) Legion Commander: brain
24: (R) Legion Commander: sop fucking
25: (R) Legion Commander: damaged>?

The above excerpt is from the all chat public channel (the chat channel participants use to address all other players in the game) in a game of DOTA2, it features participants from both teams; Dire and Radiant. Apart from line nine which was added as a note by the researcher the excerpt consists entirely of dialogue produced by the participants. The excerpt features 3 participants: Legion Commander, Dazzle, and Phantom Lancer. In addition to the three participants, a fourth person is being referenced: ta (abbreviation for the hero Templar Assassin). The excerpt features several category terms - "He" "him" "guy" "Russians". In addition to this it also features a number of activities and attributes.

In lines 1-3 it is asserted by Legion Commander that TA has performed a certain action, namely attacked items. This is then countered by Dazzle in lines 4 and 5 when he states "he got pt” thus asserting that TA has at least one item: pt (abbreviation for Power Treads). In line 7 and 8 Legion Commanders original assertion is qualified when she claims that pt were purchased after the original action and that the original action involved TA attacking his own items. The next action is performed by TA in line 9 when TA buys back into the game, an action usually only performed if you can sway the tide of a battle. In line 11 to 13 Legion Commander calls gg - Good Game which is usually a concession of defeat, and encourages the other players to report TA. In every match of DOTA2 every player has the option of either reporting players for bad behaviour or commending players for good behaviour. Legion
Commander never explicitly gives a motivation for which bad behaviour TA should be reported for but there are two actions that we know of that might have prompted this: TA destroying his own items and TA buying back into the game. In lines 19-25 Legion Commander is again asking for TA to be reported but this time adding "Why 30% of russians brain so fucking damaged?" which can again be heard as directed towards TA.

Of the category terms used to refer to TA only one is ever used as a Membership Category: "Russians", the other terms are instead used as attributes. We can thus see TAs actions of destroying items and buying back into the game as CBA belonging to the MC "Russians". Also belonging to the MC "Russians" are the attributes "male" and "brain damaged" It is relevant to point out that actual membership in the MC "Russians" is not necessary for TA to be constructed as belonging to that category.

Excerpt 2:
1. (R) Slark: report sf
2. (R) Ogre Magi: -ff
3. (D) Ember Spirit: N1
4. (R) Ogre Magi: sf feed courier
5. (D) Tusk: yeah saw it
6. (D) Oracle: he was muted xD
7. (R) Ogre Magi: LAL
8. (R) Slark: i bet he is acc buyer
9. (D) Tusk: SF, what enjoyment do you get from this?

In this extract we have five participants and a sixth player being discussed: sf (short for Shadow Fiend). In this extract, as in the previous, the person who is being discussed does not take part in the discussion. Similarly the player is also being held accountable for an action taken, in this case feeding the courier to the other team. The courier is an avatar that all players on a team share control of that is used to bring items from their base to players on the battlefield. Killing the enemy teams courier means that it will not be apply to supply them with items for 140 seconds as well as giving each player on the killers team with 150 gold, which is considered a substantial amount. ‘Feeding’ is giving up a kill to the enemy team that could easily have been prevented. So Shadow Fiend is here held accountable for giving up a
preventable kill on his teams courier to the enemy team. This can be seen as an MCA that provides Slarks inference in line 8 that Shadow Fiend is an "acc buyer" (account buyer). Buying an account is a practice where it is usually inferred that a low skill player buys a higher skilled players account to play on, thus allowing them to be perceived as more skilled than they are. We can thus see that Shadow Fiend has been perceived as being of a certain skill level and then performing actions associated with a lower skill level and that the discrepancy between the two has prompted Slark to categorise him as a member of the MC "account buyers". Line 9 can be seen as providing that Shadow Fiend is not only accountable for his actions but also that he derived pleasure from them, i.e. they were performed with malicious intent. Note that the question posed in line 9 presupposes that Shadow Fiend derives pleasure from performing the action/s referred to by "this". Considering that this is the first exchange between the teams in this match the "this" referred to in line 9 can be heard as belonging to the category bound action of “feeding the courier”, the only action mentioned at this point.

Excerpt 3:

( (R) Jakiro abandons the game)

1. (D) Troll Warlord: ez
2. (D) Troll Warlord: ahaha
3. (R) Earthshaker: shit players
4. (R) Earthshaker: here
5. (R) Queen of pain: reported leaver

This excerpt also features the activity of reporting a player, that player is Jakiro. The excerpt also features two category terms that we can see, the first one being "shit players" in line 3 and "leaver" in line 5. It is however not clear if the category term in line five is to be understood as a Membership Category or merely an attribute of Jakiro, conversely we can see "shit players" as a Membership Category, it references a group of people and the population is restricted to the players in that match by the addition of "here" in line 4. Later in the game we get this exchange:

12. (D) Riki: another leave lol
13. (R) Queen of pain: hate this leaver
14. (D) Riki: i had 1
15. (D) Riki: in my last game
16. (D) Ogre magi: why he leave?
Here the category term leaver again pops up but this time we can more clearly hear it as being used as a Membership Category when Riki in line 14-15 mentions that he had one in his last game, thus referring to them as a group. So we then have the Membership Category ”leaver” where the primary category bound activity can be seen as leaving games of Dota2. By asking for an account of why this player left in line 16 Ogre Magi can be seen to construct the act of leaving as something that one is held accountable for, indicating that this practice is not considered normal, and also indicating that the action involves agency on the side of the performer.

**Discussion**

There is alignment in the analytic features of this study with that observed in previous research. As indicated by Bennerstedt & Ivarsson in ”Knowing the way” (2010) analysing the use of in-game text typed chat may lead to a focus on situations where the normal smooth flow of events has broken down. The same might be argued for the results of this study, the times when the teams have used the in-game chat have been associated with players performing below what has been expected of them or when a player has been disconnected from the game. It should therefore be emphasised that the results presented here are in no way representative of how identity is created generally within the game but rather as how identity may be created in situations that may be considered breakdowns. Most games only feature courtesy phrases such as ”Good luck have fun” at the start of a match and ”Good game well played” at the end of the match, thus indicating that the normal relationship between players is courteous and friendly.

In Dota2 players will often be held responsible for their actions, especially the ones that can be seen as connected with performing badly. When performing badly a players actions are seen as indicative of them belonging to a certain Membership Category, as exemplified in the first excerpt by TA destroying items and thus being constructed as a russian.

When players are referred to using gendered pronouns they are always constructed as male (he/him), this is true even if the gender of the hero that player is playing as is female, this would seem to suggest that when using pronouns players are referring to the player behind the hero and is assuming them to be male. This would seem to support Eklunds findings in ”Doing gender in World of Warcraft” (2011) that gamers find it hard to believe that other players are female outside of the game, this also strengthens the
notion that digital gaming is a male centric space where women are not welcome. Similarly the same can be said about nationality, in that when ethnicity figures as Membership Category, performing badly is usually considered an attribute of the nationality in question. One possible explanation for this is that similarly to what Taylor observed in WoW, players have begun associating certain in-game behaviours with certain ethnicities.

Players would often commend the enemy upon them winning claiming that they had played well, regardless of how well they believed that their own team had performed. Players also rarely categorised players on the opposing team outside of referring to them via a male pronoun. This would seem to suggest that constructing identity is more relevant with players on ones own team. It is in fact common practice to reach out to the opposing team to complain about ones own team and encourage the enemy team to report the players in question, thus creating a temporary alliance with the enemy team where the new enemy is the players whose actions are seen as ruining the game.

The fact that players primarily categorised players they perceived as performing poorly can be seen as supporting Linderoth & Olsson (2010) claim that the only thing that matters in a game is how good you are at the game, with the qualification that this only applies when the player in question is regarded as performing adequately.

The majority of the communication between the teams took place when there was a natural decline of in-game activities, players communicate between the teams at times when they feel at liberty and safe to do so, for example two common occasions for communication between teams is when the game is paused by a player or when all players on a team are dead, thus allowing the players time to chat while not able to engage in meaningful game related activities. Players also commonly communicate between teams at the end of a match, the communication here often consists of courtesy phrases, commending the other team for their performance, but it is also at this time that players call for other players to report or commend a certain player. Often there is no reason given for why players should report/commend this player thus suggesting that players are assumed to know what previous action has warranted this call, similarly to how players in Bennerstedt & Ivarsson (2010) where assumed to be familiar with the actions, rights, and responsibilities connected with the different avatars.
In this study I have sought to answer how players of Dota2 construct other players as members of certain categories as part of identity creation in online digital gaming. The study found that assigning membership via text typed chat was most commonly performed on players on ones own team when it was seen that they were responsible for performing badly. However the practice of assigning other players membership of categories should not be considered common as most games observed contained very limited communication between both teams. This raises the question of whether it would be more fruitful to study some other aspect of communication within dota2 with regard to identity construction. Two possibilities here could be the team based chats and voice over IP programs such as Skype, or looking at aspects outside the game such as forums. When membership was ascribed to other players it tended to support previous research on the subject in that the categories ascribed tended to create the norm of a good player as being male and not belonging to certain nationalities often associated with Russia and the Philippines in particular.

The results of this study has many aspects in common with the results of Bennerstedt & Ivarsson (2010), the main theme in both studies can be argued to be how much is taken for granted of other players knowledge of the game. It is taken for granted that players are proficient with the specialised language of the game, can speak English, have knowledge of game mechanics and the role of their hero or avatar, and have knowledge of other players behaviour. There is alot taken for granted that players have knowledge of, most of these expectations become articulated when the smooth running of game play breaks down. With so much taken for granted about players proficiency with the game it may seem counterintuitive that membership categories are primarily assigned based on actions performed in the game, i.e. that there is so much assumed about a players proficiency does not suggest that players have an a priori understanding (ref. Schegloff) of other players identity, or assigned them any categories a priori. The possible exception here would be the assumption that other players are male.

When playing Dota2 the player leaves his or her physical body behind, instead being physically perceived via their in-game avatars. The results of this study seem to suggest that when being perceived by their fellow players the physical body is still present. Actions within the game are seen as being representative of certain membership category devices such as ethnicities. The category device most commonly assigned to players was ‘male’. One possible way to interpret this is as an extension of
hierarchies existing in the offline world. In these hierarchies the unsuccessful player who does not perform as expected of them is constructed as belonging to certain ethnicities not associated with the western world. The ethnicities associated with the unsuccessful player are often constructed as deviant in other aspects as well, such as taking pleasure in sabotaging for ones own team or being brain damaged, thus manifesting the hierarchy further. The successful player is usually not assigned categories at all, the exception to this would be the category ‘male’ which is used to refer to both successful and unsuccessful players alike, thus creating a male hierarchy where women do not belong in the game at all.

The results of this study seem to suggest that identity perception within DOTA2, at least in part can be seen to be at odds with identity creation in other parts of society, one such part of society being schools. The sexism and ethnical discrimination associated with poor player performance seem to directly contradict the values supported in the classroom, additionally this identity work takes place far away from the normal control of the classroom, if it is found that identities created in a MMOG transfer to other offline areas of life, this could be seen to inform social development of students in schools. Reversely, the opposite may also be true; values reflected online such as the sexism and ethnical discrimination found in this study may be indicative of beliefs players hold in their offline lives, both could be considered areas of future research.

**Limitations of the study**

As previously mentioned, most of the communication between the teams tended to take place during break downs, and as indicated by Bennerstedt & Ivarsson (2010) this could skew the results to being more indicative of category analysis during breakdowns than of category analysis in general, it could also be argued that breakdowns can be seen as well defined category bound activities that allow players to draw inferences about the player who caused the initial breakdown. Conversely it could also be argued that just because an inference is observed as occurring during breakdowns in play, that does not mean that inference stems from that break down. The inference in question may be part of a players general outlook on the game. How do we then overcome this issue if we want to analyse how members are assigned categories in general? I see two possible approaches here; one lies in player created content outside the game, Dota2 features many forums and discussion boards for players to discuss the game and their experiences in it. Forums provide a place where players have more time to write longer entries
than is usually permitted during an intensive match, forums also allow for longer conversations to take
place as the conversation is not limited to the length of the game. Additionally forums provide a wide
range of topics. The other possibility lies in viewing the relationship between the identity of a successful
player and the identity of an unsuccessful player as a two-set class where what characterises one
category can be seen as the opposite of the other. Were this the case we could for example see from the
data gathered in this study that a successful player is a player who does not feed the courier, does not
attack items, and does not by back when it is not deemed necessary. This however only informs us of
what a successful player should not do, it also effectively eliminates any possibility of neutral ground
and possibility of other alternatives, for example there are three lanes that a player can choose to play
on, which one of does a successful player choose with respect to their hero?

**Future research**

It is the dichotomy between the identity of the successful player and the identity of the unsuccessful
player that I would suggest future areas of research, in this context a successful player is defined as
fulfilling that which is expected of them. How is the identity of the successful player accomplished in
and through the in situ interaction and how do the proficiencies that are taken for granted inform this
identity construction. Given that the data gathered thus far has yielded limited insight into this process I
suggest another method for data gathering; combined with interviews with players, or an
ethnomethodological approach which would allow actions performed in the game to be analysed,
preferably in conjunction with other material, such as interviews.
References


