Journal of
•Virtual Worlds Research

Volume 1, Number 3. Culture of Virtual Worlds.

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Analyzing Social Identity (Re)Production:
Identity Liminal Events in MMORPGs

By Javier A. Salazar, Tohoku Gakuin Unversity, Japan

Abstract

Within Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPG) studies, there are many papers dedicated to player typologies. This is especially true when it comes to themes that directly or indirectly touch the social identity of opposing groups of players: "roleplayers" vs. "PvPers", "helpers vs. griefers", "power gamers" vs. "casual gamers", etc. Every time researchers label a group of players as, for example, "roleplayers" they are indeed assuming the existence of a social identity of this group. However, in MMORPG literature there are very few pages dedicated to theorizing about social identity. In this paper, I provide practical examples of how social identity in MMORPGS can be analyzed through the application of Salazar's (2006) social identity (re)production theoretical model. The basic unit of analysis is what in this paper will be called an Identity Liminal Event (ILE), or specific MMORPG events on which the constitutive elements of social identity can be observed. The examples to be studied in this paper are ILEs taken from the World of Warcraft and Star Wars Galaxies MMORPGs. To conclude, the paper offers several suggestions for implementing this theoretical model for further studying MMORPG events.

Keywords: social identity; role play; MMORPG; WoW; SWG.

Analyzing Social Identity (Re)Production:
Identity Liminal Events in MMORPGs

By Javier A. Salazar, Tohoku Gakuin Unversity, Japan

Up until now, Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) research has benefitted from a wide array of disciplines and research traditions, which has generated an enormous amount of themes and objects of study.

Under this context, perhaps one of the most recurrent themes has been player typologies. Ever since Bartle's (1996, 2003) seminal "achievers", "socializer", "explorer" and "killer" taxonomy, many times criticized or commented upon (Yee, 2002 and Karlsen, 2004), game researchers have been prone to grouping players according to their traits or playing styles and label them into a category. Alternative typologies have emerged, such as Edwards' (2001, 2004) "gamist", "narrativist" and "simulationist" (GNS model) perspective and Kim's (1997) Threefold model. Entire research projects have been dedicated to determining a taxonomy of motivations for playing MMORPGs, such as Yee's (2008) Daedalus project. The underlying dialectic relation between opposing types of player groups, such as "power gamers" vs. " casual gamers" (Taylor, 2003) and "RP'ers" vs. "PvP'ers" (Copier, 2007) has been thoroughly examined in MMORPG studies.

Even though each of these approaches is fairly differentiated, they do share one thing in common*: they identify different types of groups of players*, and by doing so *they assume the existence of an overarching construct – social identity*. Social identity could be understood, in part, as the set of traits and characteristics that differentiate one group from another (Salazar, 2006). Therefore, when researchers label a group of players as "power gamers" or "roleplayers", they are drawing upon this group's social identity. Unless it is assumed that, those fitting under the "powergamer" label share similar characteristics that would give a *relative* consistence to the identity of "the powergamers" as a group, then this player type cannot be even considered as such. Consequently, social identity is a necessary *meta-construct* that allows a researcher to give forth the notion of a particular player typology.

Nevertheless, in spite of the direct relationship that the social identity construct has with player typology themes, there is an underwhelming amount of papers concerned with how can the social identity of groups in MMORPGS be theoretically approached. Granted, there have been countless pages dedicated to theorizing the *virtual identity of individuals* that play online games and connect in the internet (e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Turkle,1995; Wilbur,1997; Foster 1997, Salazar, 2004, 2005), but it seems that there are very few that deal with *the social "virtual identity" of online groups*.

Recognizing this discrepancy, on a previous research (Salazar, 2006) I proposed a theoretical model that explains the logic behind the process by which social identity can be initially produced and further reproduced by a group within an MMORPG. In that study, I focused on describing how the theoretical model was derived from ethnographic experiences in the Star Wars Galaxies (SWG) MMORPG. On the other hand, in this paper I intend to apply this

model to the study of specific events taken from two different MMORPG experiences[1], on which the basic constitutive elements of social identity can be extracted and isolated. Hence, the objective of this paper is to provide a practical example of how social identity can be diachronically analyzed in MMORPGs. In order to fulfill this objective it is necessary to recapitulate, at least in very basic terms, the categories and assumptions of the abovementioned model.

Salazar's (2006) Social Identity (Re)Production Model

One of the basic assumptions of this model is that social identity is far from being a static phenomenon. The *content* of a group's social identity, such as its differentiating traits and characteristics, can change throughout the group's lifespan. Therefore it is much more useful to base a theoretical model on the *structural elements* on which the contents of social identity rest upon.

Thus, the model is guided by "a dynamic conception of social identity which assumes that it is a cultural construction *produced* during the initial stages of group formation and then, on the successive lifespan of the group, it never ceases to be *reproduced"* (Salazar, 2006, p. 36). During this (re)production process, social identity is expressed in the group's reality as an unstable set of social representations, ideas and collective constructions that convey meaning for its members and that revolve around *symbolic codes;* these codes are the basic structural element of social identity. A "symbolic code" is both "a structured and structuring frame of meaning and symbolic representations through which the members assign significance to the group's social reality" (Garcia, 1996, p. 5). Some of the identified symbolic codes include:

" Narrative codes: which revolve around the usage of story telling based contextual elements, provided by the historical or mythical milieu inside which the group inhabits.
 Spatial codes: involving inclusion/exclusion processes based on the occupation, ascription, appropriation or inhabitance of a shared space or territory.
 Inclusion/ Exclusion codes: which revolve around the co-construction of adscription categories by the members of a group. These categories define who is "in" a group and who is "out".
 Identity boundaries: which are the resulting symbolic and pervasive dividing lines of the inclusion/exclusion codes, and that serve as basic differentiating cues for perceiving attribute differences between the ingroup and its outgroups." (Salazar, 2006, pp. 75-76)

As a result of the interaction of these codes, in any given event where a group interacts with other groups in its virtual environment the following group categories can be identified.

The ingroup; which is the group whose social identity is being analyzed. It could be either the group of which the researcher is a member, or the group whose point of view he is trying to elucidate, or the group of players he wants to study. The individuals of the ingroup identify themselves as members of a same group through *inclusion codes*. Inside an ingroup

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[1] In fact, in Salazar (2006), I suggested that the next logical step was to apply the model for studying the realities of other MMORPGs. This paper is a direct reply to this suggestion and therefore it constitutes a continuation of my previous work.

there can also be *innergroups*, which are subgroups within the group formed by further including ingroup members within meaningful categories.

Furthermore, by *including* members within an ingroup, players automatically apply *exclusion codes* to those individuals they perceive as different than themselves, these are *the outgroups.* In MMORPGs, the ingroup usually exists within a complex set of alliances and animosities towards its outgroups, whilst imposing pervasive *identity boundaries* as a means for differentiating the "us" from the "other".

There are three types of outgroups:

The close others, which are groups that are perceived as similar to the ingroup, usually as allies or friends.

The far others, which are groups that are perceived as different from the ingroup, usually as enemies or antagonistic opposites.

The radical other, which is usually occupied by the developers of the game. Player identities in MMORPGs are constructed upon the features that developers put into the game and conversely, they are as well key factors on the co-construction of the game's social landscape. Hence, since developers participate in the game in a radically different level than players do, they are labeled as "radical others".

Figure 1 graphically illustrates the relationship between the abovementioned elements.
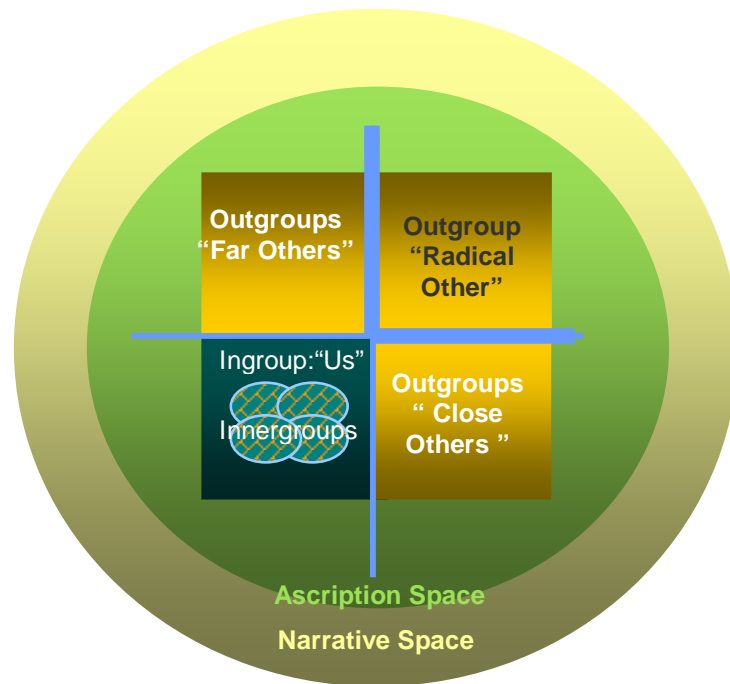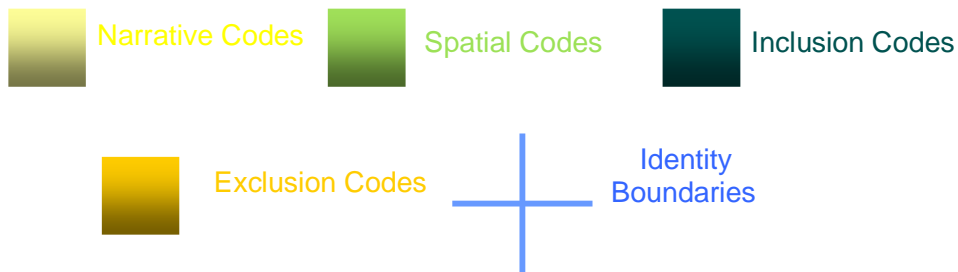

Figure 1. Social Identity (Re)production Model

Source: Salazar, 2006, p. 78

The elements portrayed in Figure 1 could be used for the *diachronic* analysis of events in MMORPGs on which social identity (re)production processes can be evidenced. This means that it allows the researcher to pick an event and make a "snapshot" of a particular moment of a

group's lifespan, with which a "cross-section" that shows the constitutive elements of social identity can be examined[2].

Now that the theoretical model has been explained, we can move forward into the description of the kind of content that can be used to fill its analytical categories: the *players' discourse* (speech acts) and *the Identity Liminal Events* (speech events) that contextualize them.

Discourse and Identity: A Contingent Relationship

It is hard to imagine how the analysis of an individual's or a group's identity could be studied without taking into consideration the person's discourse. What *we are* is in so many ways dependent of what *we say*, what *we say we do,* what *we do while we are saying it* and what *we think that we are doing and saying while we are saying it* that it is practically impossible to separate discourse and identity. Indeed, across all social sciences, most of the theoretical approaches that are available for studying the identity construct (both on the individual "personal identity" level or on the group "social identity" level) do use *discourse*, in one way or another, as the main source of information (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006).

This is especially true in regards to MMORPG studies. Since in online environments the most easily perceivable cues of a player's identity are expressed through real time text input, emoticons, avatar emotes, and speech utterances audible in real time through third party software, it is common practice among qualitative researchers to cite, for instance, in-game chat transcripts to prove or explain a point. As an example of this, I will bring forth an excerpt taken from Copier's (2007) ethnography on the World of Warcraft (WoW) MMORPG, where the author describes an attack that happened during a role playing event in which a caravan that was carrying important archives and books got assaulted by bandits:

> […] Rezoc yells: WATCH YOUR BACKS
> […] Eiswein yells: Stop that maniac! Dont let him get to the books!
> […] Amarae yells: AMBUSH!..
> […] Borislew yells: Form up!
> […] Nightgarde yells: RESS if you can!...
> […] Eiswein yells: Healers, get these people back on their feet! Mercenaries, spread
>   out! Scout the area for more!
> […] [Raid] Elaniya: ((That, was, cool. : D) …
> As the … chatlog shows …, the fight *was a combination between role-play* [italics added] ("Stop that maniac! Dont let him get to the books!"), *fighting according to the game mechanics*   (when someone dies, Nightgarde orders players to "ress" –ressurect- which is the fastest way for a player character to get to life again) *and OOC remarks* (" That, was, cool. : D") (Copier, 2007, p. 111).

In this example, it is clear how discursive elements can be used to assert a player's identity. In her paper, the author repeatedly identifies as "role-players" as those that tend to emit "in character" (IC) utterances; above *Eiswein* (the leader of the caravan) is a perfect example. On

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[2] In this paper, I will use only the categories that help on the diachronic analysis of events, although said model also contains categories for doing synchronic analyses. More information about these categories can be found currently on my Master Thesis (i.e. Salazar 2006). A shorter version of the thesis, formatted as a journal paper, is forthcoming and yet to be published.

the other hand, players that tend to write " out of character" (OOC) utterances (off-topic, non RP related); use emoticons (such as ": D" or ": P") or refer to the game in purely instrumental terms ("RESS if you can!") are generally described as the antithesis of a "role player" (could be a "PvPer" or a "griefer").

Similarly, Taylor (2003) uses player discourse as a way to stress the dichotomy between "power gamers" and "role players":

> […] I propose [that powergamers]… actually constitute a group who play in ways we typically don't associate with notions of "fun" and leisure. In worlds like *EQ* they are often juxtaposed to the role player: There are people that play for the role play aspect who say 'thus' and 'forsooth' a lot […] and then there are people who have their statistics and what's best for advancing their character (EQ player).
> […]
> [I'm] more what you might call a power gamer. I look at EverQuest as the numbers. If you do this you'll get this, this is a better combination, you'll have a better chance to kill. That's all it is for me (Taylor, 2003, pp. 301, 302).

The reason for citing these examples is not for merely pointing out that the identity of a player as a "role player" or a "power gamer" is contingent with his discourse, but instead, to set the stage for examining what is *behind* the player discourse quotations that game researchers usually cite in their papers. That is, the appropriateness of quoting this or that player utterance is determined by the extent by which said utterance fits into *analytical categories* that are implicitly established by the researcher. These are in turn usually related with the context on which said utterance occurred. In other words, these utterances are *speech acts* that occur within a *speech event*.

Speech Acts vs. Speech Events: A problem of focus

In a sense, player quotations are *speech acts*. A speech act is a "functional unit of communication" (Cohen, 1996) and includes both the performative discursive act as well as the utterance's functional role. These units of spoken or written language are meaningful for a game researcher only if they pragmatically serve a purpose within the context of the research paper. In qualitative content analysis, this meaningfulness is dictated by the *analytical categories* that are in turn derived from the theoretical framework used by the researcher, his/hers academic background, life experience, research expectations…in short, by subjectivity. However, although the researcher's subjectivity is an essential component of qualitative content analysis, it cannot be easily accounted for on its entirety on the limited number of pages or words that most research journals allow.

This might be the reason why game researchers do not necessarily always make explicit the analytical categories they use on their papers. Usually, MMORPG papers are filled with explicative and illustrative player quotes, ethnographic descriptions, screenshots and so forth; but little in regards of the *meta-analysis* that was needed to make them meaningful. Discourse analysis "stands or falls by its categories" (Berelson, 1971, p. 147) thus I believe that the analytical categories used by researchers to set the meaningfulness and selection criteria of player quotes, ethnographic diary entries, player interview excerpts, and other speech acts should be given a more protagonic role in digital game studies.

In this paper I argue that focusing on *speech events* instead than speech acts is a much more expedite way for explaining how the researcher came about with his/her analyses. A speech event can comprise a situation on which one or more speech acts occur, and therefore it refers to the contexts on which utterances are made (Hymes, 1974). In this sense, game researchers normally select speech acts from a gameplay context, that in many cases happen to be *events* that occurred when the player was playing the game. Therefore, the speech event is a broader concept that not only contains the speech act in itself, but that also helps to explain the pragmatic role that a player quotation fills.

Interestingly enough, many game researchers already consciously or unconsciously describe *game events as if these are units of analysis* by themselves. For example:

> The caravan of the Argent Archives would leave for Thelsamar […] from […] the Alliance city of Ironforge [...] The dwarven Archivar Eiswein, head of the Argent Archives and organizer of the event, had asked player-characters (PCs) to arrive early so he could hand out assignments and missions. While windows loaded […] I wanted to answer some letters […] Most of them were jobs for Speckles [the researcher's in-game character], who together with her twin sister Freckles forms a photographers duo called the Snap Sisters. This means they take on jobs that involve photographing characters and role play events […] in this case, the Archives caravan.
> […] The in-character (IC) goal of the Archives is to collect information on citizens throughout Azeroth. Announcing the upcoming caravan, Eswein wrote on the forums:
>
> *The Argent Archives […] collects information on every character of the realm, organizing it into a great archive…(Eiswein, Argent Dawn forum. 12 September 2006)*
>
> Either as guards or merchants, role-players and RP guilds were invited to join the bi-weekly caravan by which the archives are moved to a new town or village where guild members would interview the inhabitants…
>
> […] I looked around and noticed more and more delegates from role-play guilds, and when it was time to leave approximately 30 player-characters had gathered[…] Eiswein started to yell […]:
>
> Ok, time to get this on the road … (Copier, 2007, pp. 67,68,90,91).

The author then goes on to describe the series of incidents that followed on the "Argent Archives Caravan". All throughout the "thick description" of her ethnographic experiences in WoW, the author uses events like this one as an axis upon which to base the explanation of how role-players negotiate their social identity in the WoW's Argent Dawn server. This illustrates how *the speech event per se, and not the speech act,* seems to be the real unit of analysis of the ethnography.

However, even though these kind of *speech events* have been widely utilized in virtual community and online game research (see for example, Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Yee, 2003; and Taylor, 2006*) there has not been much literature dedicated to the discussion on how to conceptualize game events as units of analysis in their own right*. This is precisely the main focus of this paper: I intend to shift the focus away from the *speech act* and concentrate in the *speech event*.

In the following section, I explain how a certain type of game event that I like to call *Identity Liminal Event (ILE)* can be used as an unit of analysis for studying diachronic aspects of social identity (re)production in MMORPGs. The *analytical categories* to be applied to the

events in question are derived from Salazar's (2006) theoretical model for the explanation of social identity (re)production. The *speech acts* taken from the event constitute the *minimal units of content* that would fill these categories.

The Identity Liminal Event: A Methodological Artifact

The notion of an "Identity Liminal Event" came to mind during my ethnographic research on social identity (re)production processes, conducted in the Star Wars Galaxies (SWG) MMORPG. After two and a half years' worth of qualitative data gathering, the resulting amount of raw information was so overwhelming that I was forced to examine all my ethnographic diary notes, stored forum posts, interview transcriptions and personal thoughts and recollections about my experiences during the research on a extremely selective way. I found myself going through all the information over and over again looking for events, experiences, incidents and anecdotes upon which I could see "crystal clear" manifestations of social identity's symbolic codes.

The resulting "chunk of anecdotes and incidents" (as I liked to call them at the beginning) are what I refer to as Identity Liminal Events (ILEs). An ILE is either an elicited or natural "happening" in a frame of time of a group's life. Upon an ILE, the group forcefully or spontaneously co-constructs its identity upon an event on which identity boundaries, exclusion/inclusion codes, ingroup/outgroup emergence, narrative and spatial codes are experienced by its members on a "point blank" level. This occurs to the point that it could trigger a dramatic awareness of the group's own identitary constructions. On a discursive level, an ILE is a speech event on which a group's discourse can be analyzed in terms of how it constructs its own social identity.

It is important to point out, though, that an ILE can be practically *any experiential moment* of a group member's or researcher's life on which an enhanced level of individual or collective awareness of a certain identity related aspect is achieved. Empirically, they can also be regarded as "insights" (in the Gestaltian sense of the word) and are subjective experiences that may only be significant by whoever experienced it. The general procedure for identifying an ILE I believe is already being practiced by most qualitative MMORPG researchers: when going through their ethnographic data, the researcher should pay special attention to any particularly well engraved anecdote or chain of incidents and select those that have an obvious illustrative power of the studied group's identity.

The intention of proposing this idea is that I believe that the "Identity Liminal Event" concept is useful for the study of themes related to player typologies and social identities in MMORPGs. I see them as methodological artifacts, as tools that would allow the researcher to depict a moment on the studied group's life that is key for the understanding of what it means to be a member of said group. The utility of an ILE is proportional to the extent on which the researcher is able to justify the communication of such event as a valid asset for the fulfillment of the research's objective.

As an example of how to apply the ILE concept, I will present two cases:

The first one is an already mentioned speech event taken from Copier's (2007) ethnography on the role playing guilds of the Argent Dawn WoW server, *The Argent Archives Caravan*. The intention behind bringing forth this event is twofold; a) to demonstrate that the ILE framework presented in this article could be potentially used to re-analyze events posted by other researchers; and b) to re-allocate the discussion of "what it means to be a role-player" into an alternative set of analytical categories that can also be useful to understand the RP'ing (roleplaying) phenomena.

The second speech event was taken from my own ethnography on SWG. I will describe a player *Wedding Incident* on which the analytical categories of Salazar's (2006) social identity model can be thoroughly exemplified.

The Argent Archives Caravan: Re-explaining What it Means to be a role-player.

In regards of *who* started the Argent Archives Caravan, Copier (2007) describes that Eiswein, a player whom she describes as an avid role-player, was the leader of the guild that was behind it:

> Eiswein had started the Argent Archives role-play guild […] as a fictional subdivision of the Ironforge Library. This library is part of the pre-designed world universe of Warcraft. In-game, the library can be found in one of the dark halls of the circularly built city of Ironforge […] The Hall of Explorers contains both the Ironforge library and a museum […] Behind the museum lies the library, which is populated by members of the NPC guild of the Explorers League. They send players on quests to the many archaeological dig-sites where the League is researching the origin of the dwarven race … The game holds no further information on the library itself, which enabled Eiswein to make up his own story, without breaking the rules of Warcraft's lore as it has been written throughout the different games that Blizzard Entertainment published in this setting. During the previous two weeks [from the caravan's departure], Eiswein and other members of the Argent Archives were often found in the library, where they were performing their roles of scribe or messenger. (Copier, 2007, pp. 67-68)

In this excerpt we can clearly see how, in principle, *the foundations* of the Argent Archives' identity as a role playing guild *could be traced back to a set of narrative and spatial codes*.

Within the *narrative space* that was given by the environment of WoW and the consistent lore that comes with it, the founders of the Argent Archives took some of its existing *narrative codes* - the existence of a library that supposedly contains archives on Azeroth and its inhabitants, the existence of an Explorer League that already has a similar task on documenting its history - and mixed them with *narrative codes* of their own creation (a story behind the Argent Archives guild, a story behind the roles of scribe or messenger, etc.).

These *narrative codes* are also intertwined with *spatial codes*. According to the social identity model, player guilds in MMORPGS usually appropriate an *ascription space*, a space that is either created by the player guilds (in case of MMORPGs that allow players to build cities, for example) or delimitated within the game environment and that player guilds end up calling "their own". In the case of the Argent Archives, players ascribed to the Ironforge Library, and their identity as a guild was directly linked with this *spatial code*. Indeed, the author later describes

how the starting place of the Caravan was the library itself, and how it was *in* the library that Eiswein arranged the missions and roles for each of the caravan's members

In this sense, narrative and spatial codes were key in terms of making the Argent Archives coincide with Azeroth. It is *because* there is an Ironforge Library and an Explorer League and *becaus*e there is lore behind that it is possible for the members of the Argent Archives to let their subjectivity flow and construct roles and stories that were consistent with World of Warcraft.

In relation to *why* the caravan occurred, the author describes:

> Out of character [OOC], Eiswein explained on the forum that his aims with the guild were not only to give his guild members (and anyone who interacts with the Argent Archives) participation in an open ended plot line, but also to strengthen the ties between the guilds on the *Argent Dawn* server, to search for undiscovered talented role-players, and to encourage politeness, role-playing, and comradeship in the community. (Copier, 2007, p. 68)

This is a good example of the nature of an Identity Liminal Event. ILEs are, of course, open ended; they can be spontaneous or elicited (as in this case) but what truly characterize them is the fact that they put group members in a position on which they are forced to allocate themselves within a complex set of group relationships, making sense out of their own identity as a group, of how do they describe themselves, identifying as members and non members, what holds the group together, and where the group stands within the bigger picture, among other responsibilities. Hence, it is no surprise that because Copier's thesis explains the process by which players in a WoW server socially "negotiate" and "contest" their play style and identities as role-players, she would pick an event like the Argent Caravan to portray how a role playing group identified their members (who *is* or *could be "in"*), which are its "others" (*allies, enemies*), and how they relate with other groups.

As it turned out, the author describes that upon departure the Caravan was composed by the Argent Archives' members (the *ingroup*, as it was the guild to which the researcher became a member and it was from the standpoint of the role of the guild's photographer from which she describes the ethnographic experience), other RP players and guilds (*the close others*) and within all these there were various subgroups according to the roles and missions needed for the caravan to succeed (*the innergroups)*. Examples that the author names include: "achivars", "librarians", "scholars", "nobles", "merchants", "scouts", "mercenaries" and "guards".

The *inclusion codes* used for identifying who could participate in the Caravan can be found among the negotiated conventions that, according to the author, were used by players in the Argent Dawn server to identify with the role-playing style of play (talking IC, walking instead of running, doing emotes, behaving and emitting utterances that were consistent with the Caravan's plot, and so forth). These conventions constitute an important element upon which participants in the Caravan constructed *identity boundaries* that defined who was "in" and who was "out":

> […]one player did not role play and grew more impatient as time passed[…]
>
> **Ironforge Gates**
> […] Nightgarde says: ok… and then we go …ok??
> […] Nightgarde says: can I get in a group

On the road
[…] Nightgarde says: where are we going?
[…] Nightgarde has joined group
[…] [Raid] Nightgarde: what is there in that town we going to?

At the quarry
[…] [Raid] Nightgarde: OK::: LETS GO
[…] [Raid] Nightgarde yells: why do we walk when we can run?

[…] Nightgarde can be considered a "griefer", a player who deliberately sets out to harass other player-characters by abusing game mechanics (in this case, chat) with the aim of having negative impact on others, thus causing grief […] Nightgarde did not seem to grief on purpose, however, he just did not understand what was going on […] As Nightgarde was ignored by other players he was unable to find out that walking is part of role-playing a coherent caravan experience. (Copier, 2007, p.109-110).

The *far others* of the Argent Archives Caravan appeared during its travels, when it got attacked by a number of opposing player characters who, whilst assuming the role of bands of bandits, sought to interfere and rob the caravan's documents and merchandise. In a role playing sense, the opposing players are assigned *exclusion codes* as a means to identify them as non members of the caravan. Among these the author mentions the evil "Demonologists" guild and the mafia-like "Legitimate Business Club", which staged "a bandit hold up" on the caravan that resulted in one of the bandits being captured and later put on an IC trial.

It could be said though, that Argent Archives being the *ingroup* and the rest of the guilds and players being its *outgroups* is just one way of examining it. If we consider that the social identity of the "role players" of Argent Dawn has to do with differentiating them from those that do not role play, then another level of analysis appears. Copier (2007) emphasizes that this kind of RP based style of play is sustained by highly contested and socially negotiated player interactions, or in other words, by a process of invention, creation, re-creation, production and reproduction of a dynamic set of symbolic representations. Therefore, to understand the social identity of a group of players as "RP'ers" it is necessary to investigate the narrative and spatial codes they use, how they construct inclusion and exclusion categories, and what kind of identity boundaries do they establish within a complex social landscape of friendly/diplomatic relations, alliances and animosities.

Indeed, just as it is difficult to understand what "black" means unless we know what's the meaning of "white", or what's the meaning of "good" unless we know what's the meaning of "evil" (or any other dialectic opposites), understanding what defines a "role player" is dependent on understanding what it is to be a "PvP'er", or a "Raider", or a "Griefer". After five biweekly caravans done by the Argent Archives, the last one ended in a mayor confrontation with Horde players, among which there were the "Free Cookies", a guild that could be called "PvP'ers". The player reflections that Copier posted in regard of this event clearly show how, when faced with the *far others,* a rich elaboration of what it means to be "us" ensues:

These […] comments on the event illustrate the tensions between the different types of instrumental and role-play taking place in the same server:
Albie (participant in caravan,1): The problem is not world pvp as such. Feel free to run a blitz through the caravan killing everything in sight – we keep pvp on to enable this being a possibility. Heck, that would even be nice, if we were allowed to pick up the pieces, tend to the wounded and RP our losses" (Argent Dawn forum, 22 October 2006)
Zimbad (Horde attacker, 2): …I recently had a conversation with the "spiritual leader" of Free Cookies. And his mind appears rather odd. Apparently, PvP is all about annoying other players and they enjoy it when

people whine about them because it shows that their job is done… All I can say is: Sad, sad person. (Argent Dawn forum, 22 October 2006)" (cited in Copier, 2007, p. 122)

Last but not least, a *radical other* is also present in the form of the WoW developers. From Copier's accounts, the role that the developers play on shaping Argent Dawn's scene is subtle: they only provide the playing environment, the Warcraft lore and a "Realm Policy" that loosely regulates the conventions of an RP server. They rarely intervene on enforcing these policies unless players report griefing or misbehavior from other players. However, I would like to add that although subtle, the role that developers play in social identity (re)production is still a powerful one. Because developers are a kind of a "higher power" in MMORPGs, players often construct images of their own identities directed towards grabbing the attention of these "the powers that be". Players usually do this as a means for demanding game features or policy amendments that would allow them to have a more consistent self image, or an identity that they feel is more concordant with the game as whole:

> I Have a Dream
> by Martin Luther King Jr. adapted by Bippi
> One year ago, a great CM [community manager, MC], in whose *symbolic shadow* we stand signed the Roleplaying Policy. This momentous decree came as a beacon light of hope to thousands of players who had been seared in the flames of 1337 speak [or "elite speak," a discursive code commonly associated with PvP'ers and Griefers]… But one year later we must face the tragic fact that the roleplayer is still not free. One year later, the life of the role player is still sadly crippled by the manacles of non-rping and the chains of discrimination...One year later the roleplayer is still languishing in the corners of Argent Dawn and finds himself an exile in his own server…
> …When we let the roleplaying ring … we will be able to speed up that day when all of Argent Dawn's children, Men and Night Elves, Orcs and Trolls, Gnomes and Tauren, Forsaken and Dwarves, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Argent Dawn motto, "Free at last! free at last! *thank Blizzard* [italic added], we are free at last!" (Bippi, cited by Copier, 2007, pp 44, 65).

In this excerpt, on which Bippi tries to give a "RP" twist to Martin Luther King's landmark speech, we can see how the developers of WoW, in this case Blizzard, play *a symbolic role* on triggering identity invention, creation, recreation and (re)production.

The Wedding Incident: Wedding Crashers Meets Star Wars.

Between June 2003 and December 2005, I conducted an ethnographic research on the Star Wars Galaxies (SWG) MMORPG. My character's name was Eter Solwalker, a ranger-carbineer that I liked to role play as a "Xenoanthropologist", interested in understanding the cultural practices of different races that inhabited in that "galaxy, far, far away" OOC–wise. I was studying social identity (re)production on the ARDAIT "Player Association" (henceforth referred as "PA" - the SWG equivalent to a "guild") in the Saturn Galaxy[3]. A week before the "Wedding Incident", I wrote on my ethnographic diary:

> Just a few months after ARDAIT founded its beloved city "Mos Cow" near Anchorhead, Tatooine, there could have not been a better moment to be a member of ARDAIT. "Mos Cow" was a vibrant city, the number of active players in ARDAIT was on one of its peaks, Mos Cow had just been granted the status of

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[3] ARDAIT accepted me as a member and granted me permission to conduct a study on them under the condition that the name of the guild, city they founded, galaxy (server on which they inhabit) and player characters that participated in the research remained anonymous. Therefore, in this paper all names and other identifying cues were changed in order to honor this confidentiality agreement.

"Metropolis" (the highest city status the game could give to a player city, it allowed the placement of advanced communal structures such as a Shuttleport) the ARDAIT Mall located in the very heart of the city was a bustling and well known trade location (ARDAIT' crafters, some of Saturn's best, had their vendors there), Mos Cow was the place to be if you wanted to meet with other ARDAITers. (Salazar, 2004, p. 241. SWG's Ethnographic Diary, *unpublished*)

ARDAIT and its home city, Mos Cow, were an indivisible unit. To understand this relationship, we have to go back to the summer of 2003, when ARDAIT was founded. The Anchorhead Rebel Democracy Against Imperial Tyranny (ARDAIT) was a PA founded as a result of the Galactic Civil War (GCW), a climatic war depicted in the Star Wars movies between the Rebel Alliance and the Galactic Empire. Its founding fathers (Tock, Nur, Fist, Adios and Ketchup) were a group of rebel-aligned players that usually coincided in the rebel town of Anchorhead. Back then, Anchorhead was considered *the* rebel hub because of the relative ease of access it provided to rebel mission terminals. This meant that it was an ideal choice for Imperial aligned players (Imps) to engage in PvP: when a rebel was doing missions for the Alliance, they were automatically flagged as "overt" rebels or got a "TEF" (Temporary Enemy Flag) and were thus prone to be attacked by "imps". After days of being constantly bashed by imperial raids, the founding fathers started organizing whatever rebel player they could muster from within Anchorhead. Eventually, they drove the "Imps" away, *inclusion codes* started emerging, and the PA (*the ingroup*) was born.

Upon creation, the founding fathers placed their PA Hall (a player created structure that is needed to found a PA) as near to Anchorhead as the game allowed them to. When the developers embedded into the game the possibility for PAs to build their own cities, they built "Mos Cow" in that same spot. Similar to how the Argent Archives appropriated the Ironforge Library and constructed a narrative behind it, ARDAIT's "raison d'etre" was strongly linked with *spatial codes* bounded by the *ascription space* (Anchorhead) they swore to defend and by *narrative codes* that revolved around their identity as rebels occupying a historical place within the GCW; which in turn was a part of a larger *narrative space* set by the Star Wars lore.

As it was suggested in the diary entry, by the time the "Wedding Incident" happened ARDAIT was in its height: it had amassed a reputation in the Saturn social fabric as a force to be reckoned with, it was one of the biggest rebel PAs in Saturn and many of its members were the MMORPG Server equivalent of a Hollywood celebrity. Such was the case of Boo, the bride, a visable and successful tailor-crafter in the Saturn Forums. She was famous for her funny posts, for the quirky tabloid-like gossip column she ran on the forums, as well as a cherished prima donna within Saturn's social networks. The groom was Nur, Mos Cow's elected Mayor and one of ARDAIT's leaders and founding fathers. Invitations were sent and all of Saturn's personalities and high ranking officials of prominent PAs were going to be there. For me, it was among the best occasions I would ever get to observe the social dynamics between ARDAIT's and its *outgroups*:

Amazing. So many players in here […] there's gotta be over 200 in the PA Hall alone. Naturally, ARDAIT's allies and friends are here, but seeing so many of ARDAIT's enemies, the leaders of "GIT", of "Sanctum"[…] Even "The Outlookers" are here, although rebel, they usually cant meet eye to eye with GIT[...] When I saw those invitations I was sure this was recipe for disaster. Boo had asked all of them to please leave their differences aside, to not come with their overt flag on, and that if they wanted to fight they could take it outside when everything was over. It is interesting how a witty and charming personality such as Boo's could have such power over Saturn' s social networks and bring everyone together under a same role playing flag … Later on an interview, Tock had suggested that there was a "friendly animosity" between

ARDAIT and its enemies. It is now that I can truly understand and experience that… then again, there's the Rigor Syndicate … but nah, they wont come. They wont do that … not to Boo. I don't even know why I accepted Nur's call to become part of Mos Cow's Militia … In case something happens in the wedding - Nur said […] yes I am Master Carbineer [one of the combat professions of SWG] but I am no PvP'er, not even a bit" (Salazar, 2004, p. 245. SWG's Ethnographic Diary, *unpublished*).

The Rigor Syndicate (RS), known as an (in)famous Imperial PA of the Saturn Galaxy, was at that time ARDAIT's nemesis. Role playing as a special imperial unit under the command of the mythical "Lord Rigor",a player character that claimed to be next in line to Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader, they were a tightly knit group of PvP'ers trained in the right combat professions for pvp'ing. They were also armed with the best available gear. Through a strict sense of discipline and coordinated effort, they had mastered the game's mechanics to a point where they were unstoppable in PvP. They saw themselves as the personification of the evilness of the Galactic Empire, and from that standpoint they were active and visible on the Saturn forums, arrogantly preaching the "Church of Lord Rigor's teachings". This professed the absolute annihilation of everyone who opposed the Empire. Feared and hated by rebels and loathed and envied by the rest of the Imperial PAs that were nowhere near their level of success, they had an ambivalent reputation: from one side they were called griefers, exploiters, harassers, and cheaters, but from the other side they were also admired and respected in awe. There was no doubt they worked hard to be such a formidable killing machine:

> Smash shouts: Everybody Freeze! The Galactic Empire declares this is an unauthorized gathering and we have information that there are members of the Rebel Alliance within you. Don't move! Stop your celebration, remain in your places and wait until you get questioned. Nobody leaves the building! All Hail Lord Rigor!"(SWG in-game chatlog, 2004)

There they were, ARDAIT's farthest *far other* of all*,* about twelve members of the RS, clad on their landmark black composite armor with white right arm pieces. What ensued was all kind of emotes and in game shouts asking them to leave. While some ignored them, Boo later stated that she had politely asked Smash through a private tell to please let at least the ceremony finish. But I knew that if RS followed their typical modus operandi, they would not leave until they got a fight. They would role play being imperial enforcers shutting down an illegal gathering until they could get into the nerves of every single rebel that was in there. By this point in time, ARDAIT had developed a few somewhat overlapping *innergroups*: the crafters (players interested on the trade aspects of the game, crafting wares and selling them), RPers and PvPers, and they all reacted differently to RS' challenge:

> This is the first time I can see crystal clear all of ARDAIT's *innergroups* interacting. The *role players*, headed by Boo, are trying to role play a defiant but funny reaction towards RS. The *crafters* are either ignoring the whole thing or sending private tells to ARDAIT's leaders, beckoning them to act. The PvPers were about to bite the bait […] as I saw them switching into their composite armors, Nur sends me a tell: "ur militia now, get into your compo armor and go outside" (Salazar, 2004:245. SWG's Ethnographic Diary, *unpublished*).

Seeing Nur speed up the wedding , Boo roleplaying the teary bride that is giving the last kiss to her soon-to-die new husband, I wondered why they took the bait, since the wedding was not halfway complete. The battle began and I became "incapped" (incapacitated) and dblowed (deathblowed) within seconds, but I was surprised to see how Mos Cow's Militia, aided by an important contingent of other rebel PA's such as "The Outlookers" actually made the RS fall back. It must have been the first time ever that any of us saw the RS retreating. More than joy, it

seemed to be perplexion. It seemed so unreal to actually feel to have defeated the RS: all it took was to "incap" a couple of them and almost get to Smash, their Combat Medic and poison specialist. It was indeed unreal because a few minutes later they cleverly came again and "incapped" and "dblowed" every single rebel that was left standing. Waves of rebel players being respawned in Mos Cow's Med Center, RS waited and methodically decimated them all. Cartmann, one of ARDAIT's milita, was the only one that tirelessly kept getting killed, respawned in the med center just to be killed again, over and over again:

> [PA Chat] Joytek: Cartmann, please stop! You are just making a fool of urself getting killed over and over again! Stop giving RS what they want! JUST LET IT GO!
>
> [PA Chat] Cartmann: cant believe this. iT IS ALL OF YOU WHO SHOULD BE EMBARRASED!
>
> [PA Chat] Boo: *sigh*
>
> [PA Chat] Cartmann: This is ur city remember! How can u just stand there and not do anything to defend it? (SWG in-game chatlog, 2004).

Nur, reflecting on the whole incident a few days later, said in an interview:

> I regret taking the bait now… but then… c'mon, what was I supposed to do?. It was like being in Anchorhead on the early days all over again … Imps coming and blatantly picking on us… After all, ARDAIT was founded to fight exactly that… back then it was in Anchorhead, but now was in Mos Cow, our very own home turf! … We were once *the* PA powerhouse of Saturn, then RS came and we lost that spot… but we still are rebels, we, as a PA, are against the style of play that RS wants to put into us, I wanted to teach them they cant just keep doing what they always do, even if it ruined my wedding…(Nur, interviewed in 2004)

This evidences how strongly a *few narrative and spatial codes* can influence the behavior of an entire group, even in an MMORPG. The *identity boundarie*s that had been socially constructed as a result of *"othering"* the RS were too pervasive to simply let it go. The social identity of ARDAIT as a group was at stake, hanging in a delicate balance of conflictive narrative, spatial and inclusion/exclusion codes.

However, the *real battle* of the "Wedding Incident" was not fought in Mos Cow, but in the Saturn Forums. The thread became a heated flame war, expanding over ten wide pages, on which one player even compared them with the Nazi mindset. As a reply:

> Smash : Why are you sooo quick to push your playing style on us? Who says yours is right and ours is wrong? You call us egotistical? Yet you are the people that pop on the boards and try to spout how we aren't playing the game the way YOU want us too. NOT ONCE have I seen My PA come online and tell you the way you play is incorrect. Yet EVERY day, we hit the so called papers with the headlines.. Of how we did this and how we did that... I'm here to role play! and role play I will... Your med centers will not be safe if you are OVERT/TEF rebel, your cantina's will NOT BE SAFE if you are OVERT/TEF.. and yes, YOUR WEDDING ARENT SAFE NEITHER. There are no safe havens in the game except your house. So if you don't want to be killed and ur overt, run your little butt into your house and set it to private. Or better yet, go online and remove yourself from the Rebel faction and be neutral! You act as if you were walking through Anchorhead and all of a sudden you just "Became a Rebel" … *The designers of the game made it so going OVERT was a dangerous thing* [italics added], yet you seem to all want to sit around with your overt flag and wave at each other. *That is why we CAN and WILL continue kicking your overt rebel butt.*
>
> P.S. And to this idiot that is trying to say that RS is like Hitler and the Holocaust.. Wow!!! I can't believe it!!! I would love to hear you say that to a Jew that was in a camp, I'd bet he smack you in the mouth for being so ignorant to bring RL horror into something as small an insignificant as a game online (Saturn forum, 2004).

This illustrates the kind of negotiation processes involved in MMORPG role play. As an imagination exercise, I always thought that if I lived in the Star Wars universe and was a rebel, I would have to be submitted to exactly the same kind of things that RS's behavior tried to emulate. However, there I was, studying a community of fans that paid a monthly fee to "live the Star Wars experience", that signed into the Rebel Alliance because they wanted to fight against the Empire and who were warned of the conditions that would flag them as "overt" rebel or "TEF" (Temporary Enemy Flag)…but still, they loathed feeling the oppression of the Empire at such a visceral level. Copier (2007) suggests that this "irony" is a result of the "contested nature" of role play. Indeed, it is contested because of the complexities involved in handling the many levels of inclusion and exclusion processes that happen in multi player environments, on which the narrative aspect of role play (e.g.. the existence of Star Wars lore that justifies RS's actions) is just one of the various intervening symbolic codes that should be considered.

The flamewar became more climatic when Dogg, one of the members of "The Oulookers", threatened to track down a RS member real life, so he could face him and see if he "would still be willing to talk back". This triggered the intervention of *the radical other*; a forum manager locked down the thread with the following post:

> This thread has been locked. SOE [Sony Online Entertainment] would to remind the community members to read the forum policies to avoid the closing of threads. (Saturn forum, 2004)

Although a few ARDAIT members admittedly reported the behavior of RS to SWG Customer Representatives, considering that their attitude interfered with their gameplay by not allowing the wedding to proceed, no action was ever taken. Assumedly, because the Rigor Syndicate role played being the Empire and did not verbally abuse in-game other players nor exploited the game mechanics, no fault was to be seen. After all, as Smash defended on his post, the features put into the game by the developers allowed and justified RS's actions. In this case, the *radical other's* role is then, both "tough luck" for the affected as well as a "providence" for the perpetrators.

Conclusion

In this paper, it was my intention to stimulate the discussion about the analytical categories and methodological artifacts that qualitative game researchers use while directing attention towards *speech events* instead of *speech acts* in MMORPGs.

The theoretical framework used for this purpose is already applicable to a wide arrange of published material in MMORPG studies, however, this does not mean that this model should necessary be a substitute for the analytical categories already used by their authors. As any theoretical model, the framework presented in this paper is *prescriptive*, and by being so it is biased towards certain sociolinguistics schools of thought and social identity theories. Digital Games Studies, as a field of study, is nurtured by a healthy amount of disciplines and research traditions, and in a sense, this variety constitutes one of its strengths.

Nevertheless, I believe that by discussing different approaches and re-examining published literature with alternate perspectives can drive game researchers towards the search of

a much needed common language, one that respects and encourages variety but also recognizes the need of having a consensus in regards of which analytical categories could be *useful* to explain game phenomena. By proposing the notion of "Identity Liminal Events" as a methodological artifact I intend *to contribute*, but *not to end* this discussion.

As a prospective for the theoretical model of social identity (re)production, the "Identity Liminal Events" concept is a addition that can only account for the *diachronic* analysis of social identity (re)production; albeit the former framework does also contain categories for explaining the *synchronic* aspects of this process. This leaves an open opportunity for furthering the discussion on the possible analytical categories that could be applied when doing longitudinal studies of MMORPGs.

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