

The hybrid identity of player characters: between Facebook and the Sacred book

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Much of the contemporary debate on identity – and its fragmentation - has been informed by digital media and by its usage by communities.

During the '90s, the debate has revolved around the notion of nomadic identities that, disembodied from the physical subject, could roam free in the cyberspace.

With the deflation of the media objects that supported such paradigm, including Second Life, a trend towards a more unified, coherent individual has emerged - the Facebook model, as it became known.

The Facebook model implies a user even more internally coherent than in real life: his or her identity is shared simultaneously by contacts from different social spheres (work, family, new and old friends) all of whom participate and communicate in the same semiotic space.

Other signs of this shift are the declining usage of nicknames, often replaced by the users' actual names. The leading theory to explain such phenomena is that of the critical mass: as long as few and sparse users are connected to the internet, no one would know the user in real life, and as a consequence his or her name would not carry any information for other people. On the other hand, a nickname represents a hook on which users could attach immediately recognisable meanings and ideas about themselves.

However, as the mass of digital media users grows, and many of the user's acquaintances become part of the same network, one's name becomes a more efficient solution because it brings in play all the semiosis constructed during the user's lifetime.

However, in video games, and especially in MMOs, player characters still tend to have fictional names and identities, even when playing in groups where all participants are acquainted in real life. This is not only due to the fact that such games are generally set in worlds quite different from our own. Another reason is that the video game is a fictional world whose narration, even that involving interactions among players, is ever-pervasive. In other words, authorship of video games' fictional worlds is much stronger than that of social networks – in the latter case, the author (intended as a semiotic theoretical figure) tends to provide users with the means for communicating with each other, without providing actual plots and dynamics.

In video games, however, such narrations are provided, they inform the player's alter ego and create its semiotic value. In fact, the player does not create an alternate identity, but negotiates one with what is offered by the game system. From this perspective, player characters in video games are hybrids: the player does not fully control or possess them, and they are the result of an interaction between two authorships, that of the game and that of the user. This model differs from the self-representations taking place in social networks, at least as much as it differs from the identification between reader and character in a novel. Between the Facebook model and the Sacred book model, video game characters are the result of a collaborative, asymmetric shared authorship. To study such phenomenon can help understand the relations between authoriality and readership in digital media, and unravel their complex varieties and the specifics of video game narration within the general framework of digital media.

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