

From the Magic Circle to Identity: A Case Study on Becoming a Videogame Designer in Singapore

Victoria Puay Ru Chua

Nanyang Technological University
48 Nanyang Avenue SHHK-05-41
639818, Singapore
PUAYRU001@e.ntu.edu.sg

J. Patrick Williams

Nanyang Technological University
48 Nanyang Avenue SHHK-05-41
639818, Singapore
patrick.williams@ntu.edu.sg

ABSTRACT

We discuss how instructors and game-design students, for whom playing games for fun makes up a significant part of their self-definitions, made sense of transformations in perceptions of games, play and work during socialization into professional games-related careers. Our data come from 6 weeks of field research and 14 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted at a local tertiary institution (LTI) offering bachelor's degrees in game design in Singapore. We interviewed 10 students—3 female, 7 male—ranging from freshman to seniors as well as 4 male game design instructors with the intent of comparing the perspectives and experiences of both novices and veterans. While games scholars have investigated the boundaries between play and work through structural concepts such as “the magic circle” and through political-economic concepts such as “playbor,” we explore how the social-psychological concepts of “social identity” and “role identity” together provide unique insights into the meanings of play and work for game-design students, and the consequences of those meanings. We found that instructors spent significant time and effort not only teaching students how to design games, but how to become designers. We also found that game-design students learned to construct social and role identities which enabled them to renegotiate their relationship to games and to function within the expectations of the professional game-designer role.

Keywords

Game design, identity, magic circle, playbour, Singapore

INTRODUCTION

In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga spoke of play as “extra-ordinary”, its “differentness” making it such that play stood outside of ordinary life as “a free activity of its own” ([1949] 1980:13). He further described play as “being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally... [a] temporary world within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” ([1949] 1980:10). In doing so, Huizinga theorized a boundary or “magic circle” that separated play from the rest of life. Roger Caillois’s ([1961] 2001) later definition of games bore similarities to Huizinga’s concept of the “magic circle.” Like Huizinga, Caillois believed that play was also a distinct activity of its own, “essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life” ([1961] 2001:6). As part of his response to Huizinga’s work, Caillois put forth a number of criteria to define play. Most relevant for our discussion, play had to be a *Free* rather than obligatory activity, *Separate* from the rest of life (“circumscribed within limits of space and time”), *Unproductive* (“creating neither goods nor wealth...and ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game”), and *Make-*

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believe (“accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality, as against real life”) (Caillois [1961] 2001:9-10). These definitions construct an “ideal typical” (Weber 1949) understanding of play not empirically found in reality. Indeed, as philosophical and aesthetic definitions (Goggin 2011:359-360), they fail to deal adequately with the varied realities within which individuals experience play or games in everyday life.

A plethora of research has demonstrated that play ought not to be theorized as being unique or separate from everyday life. Using Goffman’s ([1972]1986) theory of frames for example, Fine (1983) showed the extent to which the “shared fantasy” of role-playing is embedded in a complex layering of reality that never wholly separates play from non-play (see also Williams, Kirschner, Mizer and Deterding 2018). The boundaries or liminal areas that characterize play and not-play have since been analyzed in a number of contexts related to games (e.g., Malaby 2007; Consalvo 2009; Stenros 2014; Williams 2016). Taylor’s (2006) study of “power gamers” in *Everquest* revealed subjective experiences that did not align with either of Caillois’s criteria of play as *free* and *unproductive*. Instead, players derived enjoyment from play that prioritized efficiency and technical proficiency and which was predicated on the accumulation of in-game wealth and status. Similarly, Taylor, Bergstrom, Jenson, and Castell (2015) found that players in *EVE Online* derived pleasure from producing goods and services that linked them to larger social processes and social structures. Gameplay in such studies was something that players recognized as not *separate* or *make-believe*, but rather as enmeshed in larger communities and economies that relied on their efforts. This highlights a notable shift away from the traditional, assumedly dichotomous relationship between play and non-play, and more specifically between play and work.

Whereas the studies above focus on what happens in game worlds, other studies have focused more explicitly on the links between gameplay and what goes on outside of games. As Lee and Lin (2011:452) note, the global growth—in terms of both geography and popularity—of internet and digital games “has facilitated the transformation of leisure hobby activities into self-employment opportunities.” Dibel (2006), Lee and Lin (2011) and others have highlighted the significant overlaps between play and work when it comes to Real Money Traders or “gold farmers,” whose gameplay in MMOs involves both instrumental and expressive dimensions. RMTs may play in an attempt to convert the results of gameplay into real-world currency. Meanwhile, the increasing popularity of social media and streaming platforms has enabled forms of work such as “influencing” and “livestreaming” that rely on (seemingly) frivolous and enjoyable play to generate income (Abidin 2016; Taylor 2018; Witkowski et al. 2016; Woodcock and Johnson 2019).

Thus far, the common thread that connects recent approaches to the relation between play and non-play is that they are increasingly interconnected and overlapping. They argue for a blurred or diminishing boundary between work and play both within game spaces and outside of them. There are multiple perspectives from which to approach this changing relationship. One might be Castronova’s (2005) macro approach to these shifts in terms of markets, politics and law. Another may be seen in Jenkins’ (2006:4) “convergence culture,” which describes (in rather celebratory/heroic terms) how the productive labors of consumers’ “recreational life” are deployed “for more ‘serious’ purposes.” Still other scholars have shifted to “*normative* understandings of play (and work)” (Kavanagh 2011:336, emphasis in original). Kücklich’s (2005) concept of “playbour,” which describes forms of play rooted in an exploitative relationship between players and industry actors, is often cited in this regard.^[1] A more poststructuralist but still normative view suggests that

What makes the idea of working in video games...so appealing is, of course, the notion that blurring ‘the boundary that has traditionally demarcated work and non-work experiences’ (Fleming, 2005: 289) supposedly insures that employees will see work as an extension of their own volition and that more of employees’ ‘selves’ will be ‘present’ on the job. [Goggin 2011:358]

Videogame design is representative of a larger trend in digital-oriented professions that are attracting many young people because of the intertwining of play and work. Ashton (2011) found that the

play/work boundary remains a meaningful construct for students pursuing higher education degrees in digital games design. Because game-design students continue to engage with the same technological objects (i.e. videogames) whether as hobbyists or game design professionals, they make attempts to differentiate playing games in work and non-work contexts. The students he studied made efforts to delineate *working with* games as a professional activity from *playing* games as a pastime or hobby. Separately, he cites identity transformations as one of the major changes that students undergo as they transition into game designers (Ashton 2010). However, the extent to which he engages with the concept of identity is limited to outlining essentialized roles that students take on, such as player, student, and designer.

In contrast to the perspectives taken above, our work approaches the study of play and work from a social psychological perspective, with an analytical focus on how the concept of identity may yield interpretive insight into how games-workers negotiate play and work. Rather than focusing on play and work as unique realms of action, we are interested in how these concepts help clarify the everyday realities of young people who are seeking work-related careers in the games industry due to their love of playing games for fun. Specifically, we are interested in a deeper examination of the negotiations that game design students may engage in between gamer/hobbyist identities and game-design/professional identities as they transition from playing videogames as a hobby to working with videogames in a professional context.

Identities

We approach identities as *social* phenomena and therefore seek to understand how they are made meaningful through everyday experiences, interactions and relationships. Identities are public parts of oneself; they establish “*what* and *where* a person is in social terms” by positioning them in specific sorts of relationships (Vryan, Adler and Adler 2003:368). There are multiple ways of conceiving identity and here we rely on two: social identities and role identities.

Social identity refers to understandings of the self that are derived from one’s position within a social group or category (Owens 2006). Social identities, at their most basic, highlight the selective emphasizing and/or downplaying of qualities and attributes that best represent categories of people in support of individuals’ attempt to position themselves and others. Identifying a “gamer,” for example, involves individuals playing up or playing down certain aspects of “gamer” behavior in an attempt to construct an ideal image of that identity. For concerned parents and medical professionals, the gamer identity might highlight attributes such as addiction or aggression, while downplaying other qualities such as cooperation or sociality. For gaming enthusiasts, the same qualities and attributes may be reversed. In short, social identities are not really real, but are social constructions (Schwarz and Williams 2020). In his study of higher-ed game design courses, Ashton (2010) found that students invoked a number of distinct social identities—“player,” “student,” and “designer”—when talking about themselves and their relationships with games. In particular, students used these identity categories to articulate idealized self-understandings as they moved from *playing* games for fun to *working* with games professionally. Much like the magic circle, social identities are predicated on beliefs about the realness of boundaries. Whereas the magic circle imposed a boundary that held up play as a separate area of life, social identities similarly assume to draw boundaries between various types of people, in this case based on what games and play mean to them. Social identities have practical implications because they have the potential to motivate and rationalize behavior (Jenkins 2014). As will be shown in the findings below, both instructors and students in our study distinguished “gamer” or “hobbyist” identities from “professional” or “designer” identities as a means of communicating preferred/new understandings about what games mean in leisure versus work contexts, and thus how students are expected to separate leisure and work identities.

Role identity is not predicated on one’s membership in a social category, but rather on one’s social position (or social role) and the relationships that derive from it. “A role represents what a person is supposed to do in a given situation by virtue of the social position he [*sic*] holds [while] role-playing refers to performing the above functions” (Coutu 1951:180; Dolch 2003). Role identities are highly relational, existing reciprocally with other roles (e.g., teacher-student, developer-player). This

sociological conceptualization, which highlights that all social action involves people performing roles, differs from what is often found in game studies. MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler (2008:226) for example allow that roles and role-playing in (video)games should be believable and persistent, but frame roles as imagined and fantastic and role-playing as acted out in a “separate existence” from normal life, similar to the rhetoric of the magic circle. Sociologists, on the other hand, see roles and role-play as a basic feature of everyday life. Role identities guide understandings of who people are and what they are supposed to do (both self and other) by virtue of the social positions they are identified as embodying. Research has demonstrated the relevance of both social and role identities for providing important insights into game-related identities and behaviors (Duzman and Ozkara 2019; Fine 1983; Shaw 2013; Williams, Kirschner and Suhaimi 2014).

Research Site and Methods

Given our interest in studying identity transformations in games-related careers, we selected two sites from which to recruit respondents. The first was a local esports organization (LEA) that is responsible for organising esports-related events as well as providing training and job opportunities for people looking to work in Singapore’s esports scene. The second site was a local tertiary institution (LTI) where students could pursue bachelor’s degrees in various specialisations of game design. We conducted semi-structured interviews that aimed to look at the relationships that our respondents had with games as well as how they were socialised into becoming games-related workers. These questions ask about their gaming practices before and after their encounter with games in a professional context. We asked respondents about the amount of time they spent gaming, their attitudes towards playing games as a hobby and profession, and how people in their social circles reacted to their decisions to pursue games-related careers. A total of 6 respondents were recruited from the LEA, all of whom were male and who were in their twenties or thirties. They were involved in the LEA in roles involving management, logistics, training, and shoutcasting. 10 students were recruited from the LTI, ranging from freshman to senior year students. 7 of these students were male and 3 were female. Finally, we also interviewed 4 instructors at the LTI. All 4 instructors were male, and 2 of them were educated outside of Singapore. We recruited both students and instructors for interviews with the intent of comparing the perspectives and experiences of people who were novices to game design and industry veterans who had undergone many years of experience and socialization into the game design industry.

Social Identities

Social identities, as previously discussed, are idealized representations of types of people. In this section, we look at two social identities that appeared as a binary pair through interviews with game design instructors and students. The qualities and attributes of each identity, and the differences between them, are not inherent, but are constructed for pragmatic purposes. Below, we first explore how instructors constructed two distinct identities—the “hobbyist” and the “game designer”—as part of what they saw as the need to professionalize game design students. We then look at how students themselves interpreted and managed these identity categories.

“We’re here to ruin games for you”

In an interview, one instructor at LTI, Jake, recalled how he often tells new students, “We’re here to ruin games for you.” He told us this as part of a larger discussion regarding his belief that there is a fundamental difference between those who *play* games for fun and those who *design* games for a living. His statement is representative of the distinction between “hobbyist” and “game designer” identities, which regularly appeared throughout the data. Jake described the hobbyist in terms of a particular style of play characterized by naïveté and a sense of “mystery” and wonder. Play was also closely linked with experiences of fun, as seen in a student’s description of games as “pure, brain chemical fun.” Game designers, on the other hand, were presented as critical thinkers who eliminated the “mystery” of games through “analysis and critique.” Because game designers are “educated beyond the ability to just happily enjoy [games]”, they were also able to “distance” themselves from games—particularly but not only the games they created, which they saw as products—through experiences that no longer resembled those of the average player. Such categorizations evoke ideal typifications of play and work identities: a hobbyist anticipates gameplay as fun and enjoyable, untainted by the concerns of a game designer, for whom games become a job.

Instructors put a relatively low value on the hobbyist identity and expected students to adopt a new perspective on videogames as part of internalizing a designer identity. They communicated these expectations using several means. One was by articulating their own professional perspectives on videogames. In order to embody a game designer, students had to learn to look at games “in a more clinical and objective way” [Jake, interview]. Instructors believed that game designers could no longer view games as mere toys but as “a series of very cleverly-built manipulative tactics that are there to entertain,” and they communicated the idea that students must adopt these new meanings in the process of becoming a game designer. Under instructors’ tutelage, students would undergo a socialization process that sensitized them to the design aspects of videogames. This sensitivity to design principles was a process whereby students abandoned any implicit beliefs in the magic circle and instead turned a critical lens on the same objects that had once been sources of fun and enjoyment, mystery and wonder. Game designers came to prioritize meanings of games involving elements of design rather than elements of fun.

This is not to say that a hobbyist identity was expunged from instructors’ vocabulary. Quite the opposite; instructors did talk about fun because it was an important part of reminding students of the boundary they needed to cross during their game-design education. Instructors told us and students that working as a videogame designer would inevitably impact one’s enjoyment of games. As a part-time instructor as well as a videogame designer in a development studio, Raymond said that he “didn’t really enjoy games much” while working, as he was expected to constantly meet tight deadlines and thus experienced a lot of “crunch” (Arguello 2018). This sentiment was shared by other instructors, who collectively constructed the game-designer identity in work-related and often stress-related terms. Jake described how he sometimes spent hours in games, but only taking screenshots of menus and interfaces. This behaviour was part of what Jake termed “playing for research,” a behavior that “kinda ruins the fun.” Instructors felt that they had “very little time to appreciate games for what they are.” Importantly, the idea of “what they are” indexed a hobbyist definition of videogames as ideally fun. Through such language, design instructors found additional ways to acknowledge (and even accept) the hobbyist identity as significant. Instructors could and did play for fun, which involved playing games only from genres they enjoyed, with no specific goals in mind, and without having to spend hours performing tasks deemed “tedious.” Such hobbyist play, however, occurred less often since they had taken on the game designer identity.

“Now when I play games, I can’t help but to look at them from a game design point of view”
LTI students generally agreed that pursuing higher education and training in game design had caused changes in their gameplay practices. We see such talk as manifestations of the growing salience and centrality of the game-designer identity vis-a-vis the hobbyist identity. First, almost all students reported that the amount of time they spent playing games decreased as the responsibilities at LTI took increasing priority in their lives. Holding on to hobbyist ideals, some students were not happy about this. One student, Avery, felt that he had “given up so much time playing games for LTI” while another, Eric, said that studying at LTI meant he “[had] no time” to play for fun. These comments point to experiences of “identity conflict,” a term that characterizes the cognitive and/or behavioral dissonance that accompanies individuals’ identification with multiple social-identity categories, each of which may carry unique norms (Hirsh and Kang 2016). Not being able to play for fun felt troubling for students who found themselves unable to meet the expectations of both their hobbyist and game designer identities.

Most, though not all, students learned over time to prioritize the game designer identity, as was evident in their reports of spending significant amounts of out-of-class time preemptively working on game projects, staying late after business hours to continue collaborating with their teammates, returning to school on weekends, and sometimes staying overnight on campus so they could work on projects with minimal disruption. Time constraints simply meant that students had to choose between meeting the expectations of a hobbyist or game designer identity. Failing to present oneself as a game-design student increased the salience of the hobbyist identity and thereby put one at risk of being labeled as a student who wasn’t sufficiently committed to school. This could have negative effects on their relations with

fellow students (who relied on each other for team-based game design projects each semester) and with instructors.

As students went through the process of designing videogames each semester, their understandings of the game designer identity increasingly incorporated the qualities and criteria communicated by instructors. During their transition into game designers, students developed the ability to recognise and appreciate design elements in games and reported experiences in which they learned to attribute meanings consonant with those espoused by instructors. Phoebe described how, during her freshman year, she started “[looking] at the design side instead of [the] player side” of games every time she played. Likewise, by his senior year Eric had become “analytic” and had internalized a design perspective on most elements of games including maps, line of sight, and character mobility. Isaac became able to recognize “clever” design choices, even when playing videogames for fun.

While social identities are often idealized as having rigid boundaries, research also shows how individuals negotiate their membership in identity categories in various ways (Brekhus 2015; Schwarz and Williams 2020). Some students appeared to actively negotiate the hobbyist-game design boundary, while others had trouble reconciling the differences between what they maintained as two distinct identities. When asked if their changing understanding of games affected the enjoyment of gameplay, some students responded that training to become a game designer helped them enjoy or appreciate games more. As examples, Olivia described how she became able to “analyze on a professional level” how players interact with games, while Eric was able to “appreciate how much effort is put into games.” Because their pursuits of game-design careers were initially rooted in hobbyist definition of games as fun, engaging in boundary work helped them redefine both play and work and maintain a sense of fun in both endeavours, both of which were crucial in ensuring that students continued to pursue their career paths rather than abandoning it even if their hobbyist identities waned. Negotiating the meaning of fun shaped the experiences and expectations attached to students’ social identities. Isaac was wary of approaching gameplay as a “duty,” believing that “playing for research” and seeing games only as work would “shatter the illusion” for him. Integrating hobbyist and game-design mentalities, he talked about his school experiences with games as an “enjoyable study” and “enriching experience.” While he found new meanings of fun in his work as a game design student, he refused to accept a one-sided work perspective on gameplay. He called his education at LTI “the best homework in the world” that brought him new ways to appreciate games. This signifies a choice not to simply abandon the magic circle, but rather to straddle or otherwise reimagine how it *separates* the *free, unproductive* and *make-believe* elements of games as proposed by Caillois ([1961] 2001).

Conversely, another student, Avery, audibly sighed before revealing that he “[did not] enjoy one bit of [his] time [at LTI]” and he looked forward only to completing assignments and graduating from LTI. Avery maintained the distinction between playing for enjoyment and for work. As a hobbyist, his main goal in playing videogames had been “escapism,” which increasingly eluded him as the game designer identity became more salient. Sometimes when he was playing games for enjoyment, “suddenly that veil is torn away, and you’re looking at work again.” He described confronting videogames-as-work as “not pretty, not pleasant at all.” The boundary between play and work was a “fine line,” frequently yet uncomfortably blurred. The rise of a game designer identity resulted in a “love and hate” relationship with games and the blurring of the magic circle led him to exclaim, “I [now] hate games.”

In sum, we found that most interviewees came to share (to a large degree, at least) a similar set of meanings that helped them separate themselves as game designers from older versions of themselves as naive hobbyists. Linser, Lindstad, and Vold (2008:5292) note that, “while a sharp distinction between the ‘real world’ and ‘the world of playing a game’ may serve the purpose of entertainment, it is problematic for education in which knowledge and understanding of, and skills for, ‘real life’ is hopefully what pedagogical purposes are attempting to achieve.” As educators responsible for preparing students for future careers ideally in the games industry, LTI instructors used the distinction between hobbyists and game designers as a platform from which to deconstruct the implicit notion of the magic circle, which they believed many students brought with them, but which instructors felt would be detrimental to their professionalization as game designers.

Role Identities

A game designer identity is not only a product of establishing and/or communicating its core attributes, nor of simply contrasting it to a hobbyist identity. In everyday practice, game-design students must learn to make sense of their emerging professional selves in terms of the expectations and obligations attached to the game-designer role. Thus, in addition to its function as a social identity, “game designer” may be usefully conceptualized as a role identity as well (McLuhan 2018). In this section, we clarify the role identity and its significance for enabling students to work in game design.

Acquiring a role is not a simple one-step process. It involves several dimensions, which were visible in field observations and interviews. Interestingly, role theorists have suggested that individuals often learn about a role ahead of any formal or informal training from a variety of direct and indirect sources, including family, peers, popular and news media, schooling, and so on (Thornton and Nardi 1975). Yet in the case of the game design students we studied, it appears that many students (such as Avery discussed above) entered LTI’s program believing that their past experiences playing games for fun made them both suited for and prepared to enter career training for the games industry. Their assumption that a game-design degree program would just be more “playing games” made the process of becoming a videogame designer more problematic and thus more salient to us as scholars. In this section, we look at the negotiation of the meanings related to “game designer” as a role identity.

“Game design isn’t just about games”

Only a small minority of students talked about games in ways that suggested they had either never believed in or had moved beyond beliefs about the magic circle. Astrid, for example, was a freshman who had already learned before coming to LTI that

“game design isn’t just about games. It’s also about other things...getting experiences from other stuff. I do try to pursue other hobbies such as watching films, reading books, looking at artwork and drawing because these are things that can help out in the future when I’m a designer.”

Being well-rounded in terms of knowledge and experiences, she suggested, was a necessary component of the game-designer role. Her ideas fit well with LTI instructors’ expectations regarding students’ ability to connect game design to the larger social world. Unfortunately, such expectations were not immediately met by most incoming students. Some instructors lamented that students who entered LTI as hobbyists had trouble moving beyond their idiosyncratic experiences with videogames and popular culture. On the one hand, students lacked broad knowledge of “movies, manga and anime,” which could be important sources of inspiration when designing games, but which students only narrowly consumed (e.g., they mainly consumed “kids’ stuff” such as “Marvel movies”). On the other hand, students’ lack of experience was described in more profound terms:

“Like if I ask my students what’s going on in Hong Kong now, some people will know and...will have opinions about it, and that’s fair. But some people will be blissfully unaware about it. ‘Oh, there’s something going on in Hong Kong?’ That worries me, because a lot of the things that we produce are also a product of the times we live in. If you have zero interest in the world around you, not even say Hong Kong, let’s just say in the region, Singapore, Malaysia, and all that, then it becomes.... What is your product going to be? What is the foundation you are going to build your game upon? What are you trying to express if you’re not really interested in the world you live in? That’s the thing that I try to encourage every student—but especially design students—to be interested in, because design students are the one that have to carry the meaning of the product rather than the art or the programming. Every media product has to have some sort of meaning, and it’s the role of the design students and designers to fill it up.” [Raymond, interview]

This idea of “meaning” is key for understanding how knowledge of the larger social world bears directly on students’ ability to successfully acquire a game-designer role. Because gameplay is a meaningful experience, games ought to be designed in such a way that players are able to connect with them meaningfully (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). In order for game designers to know how players might connect to their games, they must imagine gameplay from players’ perspectives.

Of course, players “are not typically very much involved in game design processes” (Sotamaa, Ermi, Jäppinen, Laukkanen, Mäyrä, and Nummela 2005:34), but this does not prevent designers from imagining what players might ideally want or expect in a game. Mead (1934) called this imaginative process “taking the role of the other,” which sociologists have since refined into the concept “role-taking.”

“The symbolic process gives the human being a remarkable power; it enables him [*sic*] to pretend momentarily that he is another person. While he is ‘being’ that person...he gets an insight into how that person probably views a given situation. He rehearses what he believes to be the other person's attitude, point of view, perspective, perceptual field, or ‘role’.... With this new knowledge he can now sympathize with, *feel with* and as the other person, and can thus anticipate what the other person will probably think and do, and he himself can act accordingly.” [Coutu 1951:181]

Instructors emphasized that the videogame design process should have a strong imaginative aspect whereby students think about how their games might fit in the larger social world. One way to get at diverse perspectives was through omnivorous media consumption—the more game designers know about what’s going on and/or popular and the more perspectives they are able to incorporate into their own understandings of the world, the more resources they subsequently have at their disposal. But some interviewees offered more focused comments related to broadening one’s perspectives, as Olivia, a freshman student, noted.

“definitely for mainstream games, a lot of racial diversity is not present in videogames. There’s a lot of marginalised people that don’t get to see themselves in creative media, and I want to be able to show that these people do exist. This is how their experiences are felt in society, and this is how I can change that in my games.”

When students can represent diverse perspectives through game design, their games contain the potential to educate players in turn. This, another student hoped, might then push players to “change [their own thinking] to reflect what [they] want to be in society.”

“You can never make games for yourself”

As game-design students progressed through the program, they developed not just a general sense of perspective, but learned to play the role² of a game designer in relation to two specific imagined categories of others: consumers who would play their games, and game-development colleagues. Each functioned as a reciprocal role that enabled game designers to perform specific tasks. And in each case, successful performance of the game-designer identity required students to role-take.

Regarding consumers, Ashton (2010) described how a game-design instructor in the UK he interviewed would explain to his first-year students that, as professionals, they would have to design games for people very different from themselves, “and they look appalled and terrified. So, of course, that is one of the first things I make them do; design something for somebody different.” (p. 258). In our study, LTI instructors similarly required that students design their games for specific audiences and therefore taught them how to anticipate what specific types of players would want from their videogames. One instructor commented that, as students learned more and more about games technically, they lost touch with a naïve player perspective. Further, because of the sheer diversity of possible consumer identities available in the market, it was impossible for designers to narrow their imagined audience to a single reference group. Students therefore had to engage in additional research, “identifying target markets

that [aren't] them" and seeking out playtesters to simulate target audiences. The playtesters in particular gave students a tangible group of people with whom they could engage interactively to get feedback on what their imagined consumer audience might expect or dis/like about their games.

As for game-development colleagues, we must quickly highlight the fact that LTI students enrolled in the game-design program were not all training to be game designers; they could choose to specialize in game design, animation, or computer science. LTI's curriculum was built around project-based learning, which meant that every semester students had to work on team-based design projects, which they submitted for a major portion of their grades. The game-design students therefore had to learn how to work alongside computer-science and art students in order to collectively produce quality products. Both instructors and students regularly talked about the significance of teamwork. One theme that emerged was how students with different specialisations were unlikely to "speak the same language" owing to differences in "worldview" and "culture" (e.g., the worldviews of artists versus programmers). The designer's ability to successfully collaborate with artists or programmers required constant role-taking, i.e., imagining the perspectives of various teammates and trying to understand what individuals in each other's roles needed in order to collectively succeed. Role-taking influenced how game designers behaved in their teams. Reflecting on his own training, Kyle told us that, as he developed as game designer, he realized,

"I should be empathising with everyone. To me, empathy goes different ways. Obviously you have to empathise with your end-users, but more importantly you have to empathise professionally. As a game designer, you have to come up with the concept. If you don't write your concept, your brief, as detailed as possible, and then pass it to artists or engineers, you don't empathise with what they need to know from you. [Then] you've kinda failed as a designer."

Game-design students were required to take art and programming courses to help build the necessary basis for role-taking. As they developed clear ideas about art and programming as professions, they became better able to imagine how teammates in those other roles performed their jobs and thus could better empathize with their suggestions or demands. This kind of reciprocal role-taking was constant as students formed different teams in different classes as they worked on unique projects.

CONCLUSION

Despite ongoing debates, much scholarship in game studies continues to rely on assumptions about the assumed boundaries between play and "the ordinary world." Scholarship in a number of fields, however, have shown that play and the rest of life (and in particular, play and work) have become increasingly entangled, such that it is now dubious to assume clear boundaries between them. This paper has investigated the relationship between play and work through an analysis of identity work among instructors and students in a tertiary game-design program. Our project from previous studies on the professional identities of gameworkers, which have tended to focus on the dimensions of those identities (Wimmer and Sitnikova 2012) or have preferenced macro-level analyses over a social-psychological approach (Deuze, Martin and Allen 2007). In this paper we have looked at how the construction of social and role identities specifically make the play-work boundary meaningful in the context of game-design work. Our analysis bears some semblance to Ashton's (2011) findings that the distinction between play and work remains an important symbol for game-design students. However, our use of specific identity theories provides additional insights into the meanings that those identities hold for instructors and students. Further, our study offers insight into the multiple bases of identity, which future scholars may be able to utilize in their own research. The maintenance and blurring of boundaries are meaningful acts shaped by the adoption of new understandings of fun that emerge with the development of new identities.

ENDNOTES

1. Kücklich's research focused specifically on "modders," player who make home-brewed modifications to retail computer games for personal enjoyment, As the author makes clear,

however, players' modifications remain uncompensated, even though they enrich game companies by extending a game's shelf life, improving a game's brand image, increasing customer loyalty, and serving as sources of future innovation within the games industry. (Kücklich 2005:5-6).

2. As previously discussed, our use of "play the role" and "role-play" does not refer to role-playing in a fantasy sense, but rather refers to the performance of a role-identity.

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