Hunting for Identity: Community, Performance, and the Curious Case of the "Huntard" in *World of Warcraft*

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Abstract: As we increasingly incorporate the virtual into everyday life, we open new spaces for exploration and encounter new (and very old) questions about the nature of identity: Where does identity come from? How do we engage with others in spaces where only a non-real representation is our source of identification? This paper argues for a re-thinking of our notions of identity grounded in the everyday world and proposes a more comprehensive set of definitions to encompass the expanded spaces of identity in the digital age. Using the online game *World of Warcraft* as a backdrop, I offer three key concepts to describe identity: that it is *performative* and relies on various states of being and actions; that it is *projected* both by individuals outward as well as by others onto an individual; and that it is *punctuated* by specific times and places and actions.

Identity is a vexing issue. It depends on people and perspective, on power and position, on performance and permanence. Yet when discussing identity, it is often treated as though it were a unified whole, a *thing* to be studied as-is, to be codified and crystalized into a specific description at the expense of all the various ways of asking: What am I? Who am I? How do I know? What do others know? What can I do? What can others do to me? This is further complicated when considering virtual spaces like videogames, where a medium sits between "me" and the world, and between "me" and others within that world. The interactions and transactions between the player, the world, and others is filtered by a shared metaphor (the game) and an inherent distance (the medium). Players must negotiate yet another layer of possible meanings to form an identity for themselves and for others, a pixelized persona that further complicates how we see ourselves and others, and how they in turn see us.

When discussing identity in all its manifestations, then, it is necessary to recognize that there is no *singular* identity, but a nexus of possible identities which includes how we think about ourselves, how others think about us, what we actually do, and when we actually do it. Each of these are a particular way of thinking about what identity *is*, from a functionalist view ("what are the actions taken") to an ontological view ("what are the nature of the things involved") to an epistemological view ("what do the actors know about and believe they are doing"). Each of these views are important at different times; we can call on a particular view to describe a particular feature of an identity. Considered together, however, they form a more complete understanding of identity in all its complexity. Indeed, together these features make up the ways we define ourselves and others, how we orient ourselves to the world, and how we act within it. Identity is a continuum of states that can be described in a number of ways; these various descriptions are useful when looking at different aspects of any identity but do not, in themselves, adequately describe an identity. Only collectively do we come closer to understanding the complexity of any given identity.

This understanding of "identity" relies heavily on a social constructivist view in that it assumes that our understanding of the world comes from our engagement with other actors, institutions, and constructs; it does not discount the individual experience, nor the "brute facts" of reality, but contends that meaning-making occurs primarily through our *social* interactions (Vygotsky, 1978; Searle, 1995; Latour, 2005; Kress, 2010). This observation is important for three reasons: it allows for an external reality in which we exist but do not have access to all information; it relies on an interpretive, experiential understanding of reality; and it assumes that this interpretation is filtered through both our previous experience and—more importantly—with the norms, customs, and institutions which exists outside of our control.

Further, identity also depends explicitly on the particular circumstances at any given moment, that the actors, objects, spaces, and relationships present determine that "version" of what an identity is. Some of these versions are more stable than others; being "American" is an identity that relies on numerous traits shared across time, while being an "ATM user" is more isolated and temporary. Some may be more dominant than others as well; again, being "American" entails a whole slew of customs,

expectations, behaviors, and beliefs, which influence being an “ATM user,” like expecting other users to stay a certain distance away while using the machine. The actions taken and the actors involved significantly influence how an individual defines themselves and how others define them. These contingencies—on time and place and relationships—help determine the identity of those involved. They also further suggest the variability of identity—who I am is really about *who I am right now*.

Given these assumptions, then, what can we say about identity? Partly that it's *performative*; that is, identity relies on the various states of being and the actions taken. Partly, we can say that identity is *projected*; an individual actor assumes a position and performs actions that they intend to be interpreted by others around them (an *outward projection*), and other actors both create and enforce expectations that influence the individual actor's choices (an *inward projection*). And partly, we can say that it is *punctuated*, that it depends on the specific contexts in which actors participate. These features are collectively a way of describing what identity involves.

It might prove useful, then, to examine specific examples of these features in action, how they are manifest in particular ways in particular spaces. Using the massively-multiplayer online game *World of Warcraft* as a lens to focus this analysis—and particularly comments from players of the game around the hunter class and the derogatory term “huntard”—I argue that identity is a socially constructed set of performative behaviors and beliefs that is context dependent and provisional.

A brief history of the hunter class in *World of Warcraft*

I’ll begin with a story, one not uncommon to players of *World of Warcraft* and certainly not unique to just the hunter class, but which highlights the sticky problem of identity—in all its forms—in action. Moxie was a new player of *WoW* (and whose name I’ve changed for this analysis), and chose to play as a hunter. She played through the introductory quests and leveled her character into the mid-20s; she explored the world and spent some time outside of the game on websites and forums reading about *WoW;* she even participated a little in the game’s chat channels, asking questions and telling jokes. When she was invited to a group to play through a dungeon, she was excited and a bit nervous—this was her first chance to fight alongside friends and allies, and she was eager to show off her skills. The group entered the dungeon and then waited, for what Moxie didn’t quite know. No one had made a move yet, so she decided she would try to kill the enemy first, to be the hero, to show how powerful she was, and how valuable to the group. She sent her pet in, waited a few seconds, and fired her own shots. She expected a quick kill—they had almost always been that way so far, after all—but it did not come. Instead, other nearby enemies noticed the commotion and joined the fray, swarming the allies and sending them scattering and shouting. In the chaos and confusion, she watched her companions die before being overwhelmed herself. As the dust settled, the recriminations began, chastising her, mocking her, calling her names: “huntard” they shouted, then kicked her from their group and far away into another place in the world, with wounded pride and little confidence, left wondering: what had happened? Why had her companions abandoned her? What had *she* done wrong?

To answer these questions, it’s important to understand what the hunter class is and how it relates to other classes in *World of Warcraft*. A player of a particular class is expected to meet the roles that they are capable of performing; a hunter is a DPS-exclusive class, meaning that they are primarily responsible for providing damage to enemies. The hunter’s role is primarily to provide enough damage to an enemy without interfering with the tank's responsibility (keeping the attention of the enemy, otherwise known as “holding threat”). Hunters have particular expectations about their behavior and performance that are assumed by other players in order to cooperate effectively. It is this set of expectations that can cause the kind of confusion Moxie experienced, and that is the heart of this analysis; namely, that she did not understand these expectations and “mis-performed” in her role as hunter, and the group identified her as a particular type of player and responded accordingly (and negatively).

Moxie's experience was not an isolated event, and indeed only happened because of a long history of the breakdown between a player's assumed or expected performance and their actual performance. Historically, hunters have been considered an easy class to play; because of the ease in playing the hunter class, they have attracted players who may not be familiar with the game or videogames in general. The result is that hunters were often “bad” at playing the game, and became stigmatized over time because of this mismatch in the assumed/expected performance and their actual poor play.

And so, as often happens in situations like this, others came up with derogatory terms for these hunters; inspired by the long history of the "retard" insult, *World of Warcraft* players began referring to these poor players as "huntards." Along with this insult went a new assumption about what huntards were and what they did. They would break the rules (often unspoken) about what they were expected to do as hunters: they would take threat from the tank; leave their pets on aggressive (and subsequently engage enemies when the group may not be expecting it—Moxie's particular sin)*;* fight in melee range instead of at range, where they are far more effective; and (in)famously not pay attention to the fundamental mechanics or requirements of effective gameplay. While these kinds of breakdowns between the expected performance of a class and a player's actual performance are not exclusive to hunters, they became most closely associated with the class and the term "huntard" became a quick way of identifying and labeling a bad player. As the game changed and other classes began to attract new or bad players, the "-tard" epithet was applied to them as well; in particular, the Death Knight class introduced with the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion was often considered overpowered, and many players played the new class poorly. Unsurprisingly, these players were labeled "deathtards," an homage to the huntard and evidence of the power of the original stigma of the bad hunter.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the "huntard" identity did not spontaneously come into existence, but developed through a chain of interactions over time (even those that came from outside of the game itself, like the "retard" component). Further, because these interactions occur between various participants over time, players often have no control over what happens before them, and encounter a pre-formed expectation of what a huntard is and can do little to change this attitude. Moxie came to an environment that had highly ingrained social constructs, and she failed in navigating them and so was labeled a huntard. Even though she had never played with other players, let alone the particular group she joined, they already had a pre-formed way of identifying her, which stemmed from the long history of other (bad) hunters. Aware or not of this history, hunters face a particularly institutionalized set of assumed performances in the guise of the huntard that they must negotiate through their specific performance, and they may remain without control to directly confront this particular identity. It is this institutionalized identity of huntard that this analysis considers, whether justly deserved or not.

Performative identity

The focus on performance in identity creation comes from a belief that doing and being are intimately related (Dourish, 2004). That is, the actions we take both reflect and create the sense of self and—more importantly—suggest that identity is not a static *thing* but rather a dynamic *way* of describing something. As Holland et al. (1998) argue, "[w]e are interested in identities, the imaginings of self in the worlds of action, as social products; indeed, we begin with the premise that identities are lived in and through activity and so must be conceptualized as they develop in social practice" (5). This approach suggests that not only are individuals acting in the world, but that others also act on and around the individual—indeed, that the world is experienced as a space for action; secondly, it establishes that the "worlds of action" that we exist within have a direct influence on *how* we choose to act. It is through our ability to act *and* be acted upon which helps us define who and what we are—in short, how we form an *identity*.

The second major reason for focusing on performance as a key component of identity creation is that it aligns closely with the space of this particular study, namely *World of Warcraft*. As a game, it is designed to be *played*, and this play consists primarily of acting upon and within the game world itself (though certainly not exclusively, as the plethora of *WoW*-related blogs, wikis, websites, forums, cosplay events, and a host of other activities demonstrates). In other words, it is a "world of action," and one of a very specific type that can be delimited somewhat explicitly. Unlike the "real" world, *World of Warcraft* has a rather narrow set of explicit actions that can be taken as well as explicit limitations; whereas in the real world, the possible actions one can take are almost countless, *World of Warcraft* has a much smaller pool of actions and states a player can choose from.

A critical observation here is that these affordances and limitations in action are *intentionally designed* (Squire, 2006) by a specific entity, here Blizzard Entertainment, Inc. (hereafter referred to simply as Blizzard). Blizzard establishes the rules and systems that players use to play the game, and controls the implementation of these systems; they are the "gods" of the game, capable of changing the rules (and therefore the types of actions a player can take) at any time. Importantly, *World of Warcraft* is a "living" game in that it changes over time. Unlike a game like, say, *Final Fantasy VII*, which remains

essentially unchanged more than a decade after it was released, *World of Warcraft* has undergone thousands of major and minor changes since its initial release, from altering the design and shape of the world to adding and removing abilities to creating all new character classes. This iterative nature makes describing the game a bit of a moving target, and some things that are important at a given time may not exist at all in a later version of the game. For example, hunters recently received an ability that lets them launch traps which freeze or damage enemies; prior to this ability, hunters had to lay the trap directly at their feet. This change alters how hunters can perform—and in turn, how others expect them to. If nothing else, this iterative nature also supports the assumption that identity is provisional, as the game world can change such that a player literally *cannot* do something that was previously a key characteristic.

Because Blizzard designs the particular ways a player can act, they *prescribe* the ways identity can be formed; for if we assume that identity can be described by the types of actions an individual is capable of, then these defined limitations bound the potential actions, and therefore the potential ways of describing them. For instance, a hunter is given a wide range of offensive abilities, both ranged and melee; though highly inefficient at melee range, they *can* fight this way; so they *can* be called melee fighters. However, a hunter cannot heal (outside of very minor things like bandages and some small race-specific bonuses); they *cannot* be healers. The types of actions available to the hunter, then, define what they are capable of and, by extension, how they can be identified.

The flipside to this, of course, is that a player must actually *do* those actions in order to be identified that way, that they emerge from the performance of the player. Just because they are *capable* of an action does not mean it becomes manifest; they player must actually perform the action for it to be recognized (Gee, 2002). The game *allows* all hunters to extreme solo (fight high-level bosses by themselves), but not all hunters can or do. This is an important distinction in terms of identity, because identity creation depends not just on what a player can do, but what they *actually* do; it is enacted by players, and it is through this enactment of the afforded actions that they express themselves.

Here, it is interesting to note that some enactments are not explicitly endorsed or supported by the game's designers, Blizzard; rather, they provide a tool for players but it is up to them how to decide how to use it. For example, a common behavior for huntards was to use the in-game item distribution tool to try to get every piece of gear that dropped from an enemy, claiming that it would help them even if it actually wouldn't. The usage of the tool—and in this case, the *mis-use* of the tool—created a defining characteristic of the huntard identity. So identity does not rest solely on the actions *possible* in the world, but also on the actions *taken*. In this way, they serve as an institutional guide steering players towards certain "preferred" actions.

Nevertheless, players had enough freedom to not use these actions correctly, and their mis-performance (that is, their mis-alignment with the intentions of the designers, and therefore the other users of the world as well) gave rise to an alternative identity of the hunter which became the huntard, with all its various deviations from the preferred norm. Thus, performative identity relies both on prescribed and emergent actions; that is, what *can* you do as well as what *do* you do. The huntard identity came about because of all the things they did—and didn't do—within the world and with other players. The huntard was identified by their actions, by their attitudes, and by their performance of a set of loosely codified behaviors that deviated from the expectations of good play. By mis-aligning their play from the norms of other *WoW* players, they created a new identity that became the huntard.

Projective identity

This mis-alignment highlights the potential for variation from what an individual sees themselves doing and being and what others see. Put another way, social actors can misrepresent, misinterpret, and misbehave with each other, and these misunderstandings come from the various perspectives of the participants. Even more directly, what one person thinks they are can be vastly different from what someone else thinks they are. Where do these variations come from? To start, it might be useful to think about them individually before considering how they align (or don't).

Outwardly projective identity

An individual possesses some greater or lesser imagination about what they are, what they look like, what they do, what they believe in, and so on. When they act, they act with the belief that they *are* a specific person *doing* a specific thing; how they act is determined by what they want to accomplish and how they think it will best be realized. An individual actor assumes a position in which they *project*

outwardly what they believe they are and how they want to express it; this is a performative function (what I do) as well as a more conceptualized function (what I "say" about what I am, for example). When considering a videogame, which requires a mediative tool within the construct of a designed space, one way of describing this projection is in terms of the player's relationship to their avatar (the most direct mediator in-game); Gee (2007) offers a description of this kind of "projective identity" (p. 70) as:

> virtual character (player surrogate) ← → character's goals + player's goals ← → virtual world

This is an example of what I call *functional projection*; it describes a way of relating to the tools available (the avatar and its functionality), the things the game wants you to accomplish (what Gee calls the "character's goals"), what the player wants to accomplish (the player's goal) and the world, which provides the space and context for acting. In this sense, the functional projection serves as a way of understanding what a player wants to do and the way in which she can do them.

This model can also be adapted to describe the way a player relates to the other actors involved in and around the actions, what I call the *social projection*:

> afforded actions ← → societal goals + player's goals ← → social context/audience

Here, this relationship describes the ways a player can act (afforded actions), what the other players want or expect (societal goals), what the player wants to do (player goals), and the space and actors, which define the context for the action (audience). In this way, a player thinks about what might be expected of her, how that compares to what she wants to do, and what means she has available to accomplish this. It also suggests that the player's goals are always a compromise with what others want and expect.

A prime example of the outwardly projected identity is "mailbox camping." A common practice in *World of Warcraft*, mailbox camping refers to highly-geared, "leet" players loitering around highly-populated areas of the world like the mailbox or the auction house, showing off their great gear and rare pets. What these players are doing, arguably, is projecting a display of mastery of the discourse, of verifiably high-level performance and superior abilities (Donath, 2007). What the player projects, or thinks they project, is uncertain, but it can be assumed that they are "showing off" how good they are and how much better they are than virtually any other player that might happen to pass by. However, what others see might vary significantly. Some may see the camper as a role-model of sorts, or something to aspire to; they can look at his gear and see how he has "built" his character through talents and equipment and use it as a template for their own performance. Others might, however, see it as a form of braggadocio or bravado, as pretentious or even disrespectful since he might linger for hours at a time near highly trafficked areas of the world showing off.

This division—what a camper thinks they are demonstrating and what other players think about them—is at the heart of the huntard identity; hunters rarely self-identify as a huntard and often think they are performing as a good hunter, while others may see something quite different. To better describe this potential division, I'll turn my focus to these other actors and their influence on the individual.

Inwardly projective identity

These other actors have preconceived notions of the world and others that they bring to any interaction. Often, the subject of their current attention may have little to do with these previous assumptions and may have little chance to contest or alter them, as was the case with Moxie. The individual at the center of their attention may have no access or even knowledge that they are being defined and identified.

The inwardly projective identity takes many forms. It is the source of identities like "American," or "woman," or "student." These definitions rely on the support of the community at large, which positions the individual as a *subject* to the power of the community around them and on which this community influences the decisions made by the actor. These pressures can build such that they become normative, as in the case of "American," to such an extent that they become universal expectations within the community, and the actor is expected to meet these criteria.

As a group of (presumably) more experienced players grouped with Moxie, they brought specific expectations of what constituted a “good” hunter. These expectations were forged through the institutions of both the game itself (Blizzard, as the designer who sets the rules) and the community of other players, who had developed normative assumptions about effective play. Unfortunately for Moxie, she was unaware of these expectations; indeed, the game had been training her to play one way (aggressively and at her own pace) and gave her little or no direct support for understanding the new conditions for her engagement with others. When Moxie mis-aligned her performance with the expectations for “ideal” hunter play within a group (she pulled threat and didn't wait for the other players), the group had another set of performative expectations to call on and assign to her, that of the huntard. While Moxie had enacted some of the “huntard” characteristics inadvertently, the group assumed that was her “actual” identity and acted accordingly.

Moxie had, to that point, no direct access to the expectations that other players had for her; the group similarly had no interest in trying to express them. Here, the inwardly projective identity provided pressure (through fear of being shunned by others) to conform to the institutionalized expectations of the other players. As a result, Moxie changed her performative and outwardly projected identity, and has never been called huntard again. Moxie might have been a huntard with that first group, but she is not *universally* a huntard.

Punctuated identity

This notion of temporary or provisional identity relies, of course, on understanding the world as a place in motion, that it is a dynamic space. Punctuation does not refer simply to temporal features (when did it happen), but rather to all of the circumstances of the “moment” including the actors, objects, spaces and other features of the world. In Moxie’s case, one group of players saw one instance of a player and positioned it as an example of a “huntard,” and took action accordingly. But subsequent groups of players that Moxie has played with have never identified her as a huntard, at least not overtly. Interestingly, she internalized the identity that was given to her (or, more accurately, that she co-created and was given a specific term for it by the group of players) and used it as a way of thinking about herself, but *only under certain circumstances.* That is, she recognizes that she can be a huntard at certain times because of certain behaviors, but that it is not who she is.

Some characteristics or identities, as noted above, can be more persistent than others. A player who makes a trade with another player takes on the short-lived identity of “seller” during the duration of the transaction (though she will always remain the “seller” of that object as long as it's around and people *recognize her* as the seller). The same player maintains a stronger identity as “hunter” since she is locked into that role for the course of the game; she is even more strongly tied to the identity of “player” since her game play *requires* her to act; (arguably) nothing can happen to or by her without her “real life” interaction with the game, and so on.

Similarly, some identities are voluntary, or at least accepted; being a “seller” is a necessary state for a sale to occur, and the player is forced to assume this position, but likely does so readily in order to complete their intended goal (financial gain). Being a good player or “leet” is an aspirational identity that the player actively works to project. Being a huntard is likely not a voluntary identity (or even intentional), but one projected onto the player. And, as established above, some identities are unknown to those it is ascribed to; the actor may have no knowledge that they have been identified and described a certain way. In this case, it might seem that this identity is of no use since the actor has no access to it; however, this identity might still prove important since it can be tied to reputation (other players might talk about the hunter, for example, and decide they would never group with her going forward). Though the hunter has no knowledge of the effects of this identity, she is still affected by it.

Finally, identities can change over time, as is the case of Moxie. In her early play, she was often lost or confused, and her first group encounter (what she called her “huntard run”) represents one point in her overall progression. Now a level-capped player and raid leader, she no longer performs as a huntard or has that identity projected onto her; she is now a respected and expert hunter. Her fellow guildmates have witnessed this transformation, so she carries with her not just her current identity, but a history of change over time in her performance and her attitudes. Her identity is not static, but is a manifestation of all the various ways she has constantly re-created it. Importantly, however, this history is only apparent to those who recognize it as such and have access to her previous iterations.

Putting it all together and implications

So here we have a real "chicken and egg" scenario: if identity is a situated instance of individually enacted (re)configuration of a socially constructed set of performative expectations based on actual, lived experience with the performance of these actions within a construct of afforded and limited actions, where does identity really come from? In the case of *World of Warcraft*, we might be able to say that it begins with Blizzard, the gods of the world who breathe life into a particular tool set that becomes "hunter" that players then inhabit. But even here, the outwardly projective identity comes into play because Blizzard does not prescribe the actual actions that help create and define the huntard. That comes from the players themselves, and the community of non-hunters who witness and label the behavior that propagates as huntard, and so the inwardly projective identity is in play too. Finally, it relies on a particular confluence of actors, events, and orientations and remains ephemeral and subjective, so any attempt to locate its source might be a futile endeavor by default. It may be enough, when trying to determine the source of an identity, to say that it is an emergent property of the individual and social actors in a particular time and place for a particular purpose and depends on the perspective of those doing the actual "defining."

World of Warcraft provides a space where identity formation—for actors and communities alike—is mediated through the screen and is bounded by designed affordances, but the insights of the process and the ways it manifests applies to other social activities as well. Having a rich set of terms to use when analyzing interactions allows for more robust research and more nuanced descriptions of these interactions and in clarifying the particular focus of the research (on performance, on social situations, on interpretations, and so on). Simply being able to talk about *what part* of identity is being interrogated is a critical step towards better research. More abstractly—and more importantly—understanding that identity encompasses a range of factors and variables and is a continuum of states that all contribute simultaneously to defining any identity is a key requirement for engaging in the analysis of identity formation and practices. Finally, since identities are enacted in the everyday world in everyday situations, knowing the complexities involved in creating and maintaining any identity may foster more careful interactions with other social actors and more informed actions and assumptions.

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