

# Games and the Performance of Multi-Layered Identities

Alison J. Croasdale<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University College London (UCL)

[a.croasdale@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:a.croasdale@ucl.ac.uk)

Drawing on findings from a study exploring the educational potential of videogame design for teaching about narrative, this paper explores different forms of performance emerging from students in an English secondary school experiencing structured learning through videogame design. From performing subcultural identities as ‘fans’ or ‘geeks’ (Jenkins, 1992; Ito et al., 2013), to performing as amateur game designers, alongside performing as players in-role in-game (Bacalja, 2020), and performing expected identities as ‘students,’ the argument is made that games, and the social groups where teenagers share games, engender multi-layered performances of identities such as those mentioned, assisting in the formation of a more coherent self-identity in teenagers as they explore how identity is both fluid and multifaceted.

The study this paper derives from was part of a larger project by D.A.R.E. (now ReMAP), a research group at University College London’s IoE, with findings elsewhere published by Burn (Burn, 2021) and De Paula (De Paula et al., 2018; De Paula, 2023). The focus of the project was the use of literary texts (*Beowulf*, *Macbeth*) as stimuli for videogame design and making, using the software *MissionMaker*, itself created at UCL-IoE. The findings discussed here pertain to data gathered in one East London secondary school by a researcher also employed there as a teacher. During this part of the project, students (12-16 years old) were invited to design and make *MissionMaker* videogames reflective of one of the target narratives - some students participated in an extra-curricular club exploring *Beowulf*, whilst some the students completed a study day exploring *Macbeth*. The performative aspect of the work was not originally foregrounded, but became a key consideration in accounting for the output created by the students, and the relationships they formed.

The relationship of performance and games will be taken broadly, to encompass the layered ways in which ‘performances’ manifested organically during the study, and to acknowledge the ways the emergent identities of teenagers can also generally be understood as ‘performative,’ particularly when considered within a group dynamic with their peers. Recognising Bacalja’s use of Gee’s ‘projective identity’ (Bacalja, 2020) this paper explores how the shared semiotic resources - from both wider culture, and those generated internally to the research space - of the student-participants led to multiple levels of performance as the group assembled versions of themselves to perform, both in- and out- of game. One layer of identity under consideration is that of the player/avatar in

the games themselves, but reflective of this, we will also consider the extent to which the students viewed themselves as 'gamers' (Martey and Consalvo, 2011; Shaw, 2012; Wilde and Evans, 2019; Kivijärvi and Katila, 2022). The layers of performativity also lead to consideration of perceived audiences for identity and in-game performance. Taking additional inspiration from Fernández-Vara's work on how theatrical performativity can be used as a framework for understanding forms of performance in games, thought is given to the extent to which theatre-as-metaphor can account for readings of identity performance in game environments, and offline in front of peer-audiences (Fernández-Vara, 2009).

## References

- Bacalja, A. (2020). "'It's got that power over you": Negotiating Projective Identities in the English Classroom'. *Game Studies*, 20 (2). Available [Online] at: <https://gamestudies.org/2002/articles/bacalja>. [Last accessed 15 April 2024].
- Burn, A. (2021). *Literature, Videogames and Learning*. Routledge. Available [Online] at: <https://www.routledge.com/Literature-Videogames-and-Learning/Burn/p/book/9780367458249>. [Last accessed 7 June 2022].
- De Paula, B. (2023). 'Exploring game grammars: a sociosemiotic account of young people's game-making practices'. *Visual Communication*, 22 (4), pp.693-712.
- De Paula, B.H., Burn, A., Noss, R. and Valente, J.A. (2018). 'Playing Beowulf: Bridging computational thinking, arts and literature through game-making'. *International Journal of Child-Computer Interaction*, 16, pp.39-46.
- Fernández-Vara, C. (2009). 'Play's the Thing: A Framework to Study Videogames as Performance'. *DiGRA Proceedings*.
- Ito, M., Baumer, S., Bittanti, M., Boyd, D., Manion, A. and Cody, R. (2013). *Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out - Kids Living and Learning with New Media*. Cambridge, Mass. London: MIT Press.
- Jenkins, H. (1992). *Textual Poachers*. Routledge.
- Kivijärvi, M. and Katila, S. (2022). 'Becoming a Gamer: Performative Construction of Gendered Gamer Identities'. *Games and Culture*, 17 (3), pp.461-481.
- Martey, R.M. and Consalvo, M. (2011). 'Performing the Looking-Glass Self: Avatar Appearance and Group Identity in Second Life'. *Popular Communication*, 9 (3), pp.165-180.
- Shaw, A. (2012). 'Do you identify as a gamer? Gender, race, sexuality, and gamer identity'. *New Media C Society*, 14 (1), pp.28-44.
- Wilde, P. and Evans, A. (2019). 'Empathy at play: Embodying posthuman subjectivities in gaming'. *Convergence*, 25 (5-6), pp.791-806.