Video Game Spaces & Interpersonal Relationships: Research Through Gameplay Characteristics, Identity and Transculturality

Jeremie Garcia

Monmouth University

Professor Vujnovic

Introduction

Through online gaming communities and in a variety of genres and interactive spaces, the research conducted on the development of interpersonal relationships continues to expand as new identities emerge from exploring these communicative spaces. The resulting outcomes from individuals interacting in these spaces has created a positive escape for those wishing to interact with an online community operating as a diverse space of transformative media where the player builds their online and offline connections with others. Recent research has shown that video games relate to online social media platforms as players continue to "develop new social ties in the virtual space" that can develop into offline social interactions (Lai, Fung, 2020.) Continued analysis of interpersonal relationships developed through video games have presented the technology with positive outcomes. Virtual game spaces where players share similar game characteristics such as character traits, features, role types, interest in a game's narrative and the storytelling/world building process through gameplay has led to constructive, meaningful relationships within and beyond the scope of an online game.

While the research into this field of communicative interpersonal within online and offline video game spaces is under continuous development, this study will focus on a qualitative investigative process into interpersonal relationships from video game spaces. The use of an interview process with a group of participants will guide the qualitative research study. The exploration of the social experiences gained by players in primarily online game spaces has also led to further research on how player relationships can be linked to aspects of transcultural diversity in game communities. Some of these relationships have also functioned as online and offline social support groups providing the benefits of those in need of a healthy, codependent

connection with another person (Urquizo, 2020). By creating sustainable, interpersonal relationships in video game spaces, how can these social interactions evolve into meaningful support systems beyond a virtual experience? Can aspects of transculturality, diversity, and like-minded values in online games persist when players move in and out of the virtual space? The exploration of interpersonal relationships in online game spaces opens the possibility to further develop research into the unique value of game mechanics, narratives, and other elements of communication in relation to social interactions and identity formation of players.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Research into the field of interpersonal communication in virtual spaces, while a rather new area of study, is continuously evolving with multiplayer game spaces transforming depending on the virtual space of the game, the genre, and the narrative the game follows. Virtual gaming spaces with a large quantity of players interacting at once, such as MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games) and 1-4 player cooperative games (Badrinarayanan et al. 2014), tend to form relationships that players develop as the game's narrative evolves. These virtual spaces create a codependent transformation that involves player interactivity working with a group of other players through teamwork skills while connecting player characteristics and values to others (Lai, Fung, 2020). This creates a shift away from the dependency of the game itself and to the players online who craft the experiences that entice the individual to socialize amongst others that share similar goals. The emergence of an *interpersonal relationship* in response to the cause-and-effect slope of the actions taken by players in an online space extends the desire for communication with others. The extension of the social network in this area reacts

in a unique, but similar manner to social media websites and online forums where connecting with others is accelerated as the characteristics of an individual's profile matches with others, thus leading to connections with diverse backgrounds (Gannon, 2022). Interactions with players who share similar values, corresponding to their character and personality, act as the driving force for communicative relationships to evolve with video game spaces enhancing the cycle that reels in the player to repeat this mode of communication.

The concept of the *interaction ritual*, in reference to the micro-social moments of encounters that occur in everyday life, are also apparent in virtual spaces (Liao et al, 2023). Methods of influential outcomes in interpersonal communication function dynamically with these 'rituals' as cooperative actions in relation to a game's narrative or reward system drives the need to interact with other players. Structural characteristics of a game's mechanical and narrative elements are a study of *taxonomy* in an online game's space (Delfabbro, Griffiths, 2011). Resulting outcomes of collaboration in interactive, virtual spaces have led to players relying on advanced skills and teamwork abilities specific to character roles to succeed in shared objectives, which in turn build meaningful connections with other players (Urquizo, 2020). Proposals towards predictable interpersonal influence in communicative relationships have resulted in transitional shifts in attention and shared emotional conversations (Liao et al, 2023) as players share their model of *solidarity*. In this case, *solidarity* is a role of accountability where the player, specific to the virtual space takes the responsibility to either a complete part or all of a goal for the group and/or to create meaningful dialogue in response to experiences the player encounters. However, this area of research has had little development so far with social networking in virtual spaces yielding positive, consistent results only at a surface level of understanding (Lai, Fung, 2020). An

overarching study that analyzes the interaction ritual's purpose within online game spaces expands upon the research presented by previous studies while providing avenues for future research that can observe varying perspectives of online players who sustain online relationships from games.

Research in the development of interpersonal communication in virtual spaces focuses on the construction of the attention to the gathering along with the emotional aspect (Collins, 1981, 2004), attached to the interaction with players. Although this concept is applied to an offline, personal dynamic that relates to reactionary responses within a real-time space, this theoretical perspective can apply to video game spaces depending on the *taxonomical structure* of characteristics relating to gameplay and character choices made by the player (Delfabbro, Griths, 2011). Instances of virtual experiences have presented to elements of play that separate from traditional, offline modes of interpersonal relationship dynamics. In the transformative process of the social-constructive nature of communication, video game spaces function in correspondence with the actions of the players dependent on their characteristics and the roles they partake in online (Gandolfi, 2018). Emotional impacts of empathy and a need for cooperation arise in teamwork environments (Gandolfi, 2018) creating understanding between or amongst players who share similar ethical values. The correlations of gameplay aspects remain theoretical with further research still needed to fully understand individual motivations to continue interactions within the virtual world. Game principles coincide with the interactivity of the video game experience reflecting characteristics of the human psyche (Pravdova, Hudikova, 2021) in an online environment. Interpersonal relationships then act as opportunities for engagement with other players, searching for repetitive, shared experiences. The fascinating nature of the virtual world creates a desire for the players to expand their social network in an online game and in the

transitional phase of repeating those interactions with players. At times, these relationships construct a 'safe space' for players to develop closer-knit bonds through gameplay elements that can extend relationships beyond that of the game (Urquizo, 2020).

The interpersonal relationship dynamic in online game spaces has also shown connections to the *transculturality* of players mentioned previously as an environment for diverse backgrounds to converge in an online space (Ganzon, 2022). Transcultural analysis intertwines the globalization of games and media where diversity and interconnected values beyond country borders shape evolving backgrounds and identities (Chin, Morimoto, 2017). Much like social media networking sites, online game spaces incorporate transculturality with simple and complex designs for exactly how the media itself revolves around the interactions players receive from the game's core design elements. The concept of 'play', from the perspective of an online video game and with the involvement of interpersonal relationships involves specific pleasurable instances of interaction to form (Pravdova, Hudikova, 2021) through joined experiences with motivation from the desire for socialization. Multiplayer games like MMORPGs and cooperative games specifically excel in this field as communicative processes that combine abilities and skills of other players through teamwork settings to face adversities highlight the necessity for individuals to expand their identities within the world of the virtual environment (Przymus et al. 2022). The transcultural nature of game creation through various roles and demographics examines these spaces of social interaction as a methodological approach for identity formation (Ganzon, 2022) further enriching the experience of lasting relationships players seek through ever-evolving narratives and worlds. In the case of MMORPGs and some cooperative games, the real and imaginary communities build similarities with custom character creation, role classes and various other gameplay elements that

are integral to the experience. *Final Fantasy XIV*, *The Elder Scrolls: Online*, *Black Desert Online* and *Helldivers 2* factors in customization as a key element of character identity. However, while MMORPGs contain an enormous player base, they are not the dominant genre with handheld and stationary console games accounting for more players (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, 2008). Console games and their online forum groups on social networking sites expand upon interpersonal relationship theories focused on *solidarity* with identity formation constructing repetitive interactions that create enhanced, meaningful relationships inside and outside of an online game space. Regardless of the genre of game the player communicates in, virtual online spaces of video games continually form change for players with varying identities and background that aid in the development of interpersonal relationships with others.

Environments of virtual game space attributes also relay connections to systemic functions of game principles that develop rules, roles, and hierarchies' players follow with others (Badrinarayanan et al. 2014) as these guidelines coincide with player's characteristics outside of the game. Gameplay features, like guilds in MMORPGs, constitute the possibility of encounters discussing game objectives and tactics (Badrinarayanan et al. 2014) that lead to possibilities for more opportunities in diversity through communicative relationships. Game worlds that continually change seek out necessary interactions amongst players that face adversity through the *taxonomical structure* of a game (Przymus, Smith, 2017). This builds upon existing player beliefs behind identity and background as a core mechanic of the game. Game literacy functions as a part of the game socialization spectrum where the cultures of other forms of identity can contextualize different understandings of other players (Ganzon, 2022) through personalized experiences. While not all interpersonal relationships will develop from consistent connections throughout a game's

mechanics and evolving narrative, players tend to broaden their outlook to other mediums of communication in fandoms and online forums. These will not be observed as part of the methodological approach in this study but are mentioned to note that they are another outlet for online game spaces to develop interpersonal relationships. The exclusion of others based on their identity can be analyzed with further research into specific game spaces, fandoms, and communities that exist within the transmedia lens and operate like other outlets for communication.

Involving participants in a codependent space of game functionality where the social construction of players in online environments enriches similar values and varying identities in the creation of a unique social networking space. The analysis and examination of the literature behind interpersonal relationships in video game spaces proposes multiple research questions in conjunction with the methodological approach of this study.

1. What are the main variables that construct a desire for players to interact through repetitive, shared experiences in an online game space?

2. How impactful are the characteristics of a player's in-game identity in creating and retaining interpersonal relationships with players?

3. How do transculturality and diverseness integrate the scope of a video game's space? Can this create sustainable, social support systems both online and offline?

Method of Research Design

This study's sample for analysis will interview a set of participants who have interacted with online video game spaces through a qualitative interview and survey process complemented by proposed interview questions. The 'players' of the research study amounted to six complete interviews with the participants who have interacted online in multiplayer games. The type of game was specified as either a massive multiplayer or cooperative experience depending on which game had created the interpersonal relationship. Characteristics of each participant in the context of the *taxonomical framework* previously mentioned (Delfabbro, Griffiths, 2011) with other players through online game spaces that correspondent to one of the two game genres are represented in the study as dependent variables. In this methodological approach, interviews serve as an effective choice for the study to personalize each experience per participant. With a small number of participants explaining specific scenarios, interactions and possible sustained interpersonal relationships with other players online, a structured form of data collection and analysis can be the most efficient method. Forms of the *interaction ritual*, *solidarity*, and *transculturality* in identity across various game genres diversify analytical data depending on the responses provided by each participant. While a structured questionnaire could also work as an effective methodological tool for data collection, the limitations to a total of six participants offered closer insight into each experience with one-on-one interviews. The effectiveness of this research design's credibility is similar to other traditional newsrooms, such as 'The New York Times,' where journalists continually use a rigorous structure of interview processes to craft their research design. This is most clear on the podcast 'The Daily' where publisher Jeremy Engle

(Engle, 2021) elaborates on strategizing an interview, how to interact as an interviewee, and other questions that offer more insight into the research design process.

To conduct this structured interview of each player in response to their experiences in online video game spaces, the research prioritizes a set of questions provided to each participant. With the ability to directly research attitudes and experiences through coordinated, constructed interview processes, the range of diversity in responses offered suitable material to analyze the interpersonal relationships developed by each player in an online game space. Participants were then contacted online with a set of questions that they were to answer based on their experiences in online gaming space. These questions related to the development of interpersonal relationships with other players and how those relationships have either continued or not lasted after the first meeting. Participants were contacted over the course of a week-long basis with enough time for each interview to occur with interactions specifically being more recent (within a 5-year period) for accurate information.

1. *Primary demographics of shared experience in an online game.* Player engagement and activity through online game spaces were constricted to multiplayer scenes in MMORPGs and cooperative games. This was based around the *taxonomical framework* gameplay mechanics, teamwork skills, and/or continuing narratives of a game's world building. Each game's genre and its dependency on other players in real time contributed to the framework of the study in connecting the development of relationships to certain gameplay aspects in the environment. This also had the possibility to connect to other social networking platforms for discussion (e.g.

Discord, YouTube, Reddit) if there is an outside connection beyond the dimensions of a game.

2. *Player Characteristics.* The connection of player characteristics to the development of in-game communities in settings of MMORPGs and other multiplayer games (Badrinarayanan et al. 2014) functions on a structure of a gameplay elements dependent on the game's operation. The system used to coordinate characteristics in relation to a player's likelihood of interacting with other players and having sustainable, repetitive experiences with others is based on a 5-point Likert scale. This ranges from Highly Probable (5) to Not Often (1) depending on the player's response to aims within a game structured around teamwork experiences. In the analysis of the interaction ritual perspective of players in the scope of an online game, elements of gameplay and character attributes to their personalities and the narrative of a game throughout the interview process. Emotional factors (joy, anger, sadness, etc.) revolving around a player's character in the online multiplayer environment contribute to the probability of the development of relationships. These characteristics were valuable factors in contributing to the study's accuracy in recording player's social experiences.

3. *Transculturality and social support systems in video game spaces.* Transcultural elements and diversity were referenced in the literature review and can be an important element in finding personality traits that connect players in online game spaces. Basic demographic components were asked by participants to associate personal background with the characteristics in a game. Retention of interpersonal relationships and the formation of social support groups outside of a game's

environment were divided into separate interview questions. While only 2 participants experienced an outreach of a social support group, the study provided the analysis of the data to show the probability of this occurring after interpersonal relationships.

Findings, Results, and Analysis of Data

After a thorough analysis of the interviews received with the answers to each question sorted based on the connection to the overall issue and research question, multiple variables of video game space attributes in character elements and principles were accounted for. The *taxonomical structure* relating to gameplay mechanics, the narrative of a continuous multiplayer world and character identities showed heavy connection in all of the 6 participants of this study. However, only 4 of those 6 participants showed a development of interpersonal relationships in their experiences with other players in MMORPGs or cooperative games. The effectiveness of gameplay characteristics in sustaining interpersonal relationships with other players remained at 3 participants leading to follow up questions in the discussion during those interviews. Retention of connections formed with other players heavily relied on communication means outside of the online game's environment through messaging systems and/or online voice chat. Data was fixated on the experiences noted from qualitative analysis gathered from the collection of the interview questions answered by the participants. Variables of personality traits, game characteristics, gameplay mechanics and narrative, and personal values were present in the online game space. To note, potential criticism of the study can connect to the lack of participants where a survey approach could be more effective. This would have either entailed a separate questionnaire for

participants to answer with the assistance of other social networking sites or work cooperatively with the current interview study.

Gameplay characteristics in connection to outside of the game's online space were more so part of the first communication phase that players experienced online. The structure of game elements in connection to the *interaction ritual* and the *taxonomical framework* were important variables to the communication in the interpersonal relationship. After multiple interactions with other players, the participants experienced positive communication with the other players online through other online sessions either in the same multiplayer game or in a different game. These participants were divided into a separate group on the basis that 33%, or 1/3 of every 6 players in multiplayer gaming environments, will continue communication with other players that they meet online. The other 2 participants of the data analysis associated with specific characteristics of interpersonal relationships in online game space noted a connection of transculturality and diversity in their communities. However, this was not as clear as expected in the framework where demographic concepts do not account for a specific reason for player communication. Character traits and personal values as a part of the player were more valuable in constructing a thorough analysis of the most impactful elements of identity formation in each participant's answers. The concerns of demographics and ethnicity in game communities can trouble players at times (Wanzo, 2015) with support systems for players outside of the online game environment are accompanied through acceptance without a direct spotlight on diverse, cultural attributes of a specific player. Instead, the connection of *solidarity* in 4 of the 6 participants who crafted communicative spaces through identity learning of game mechanics and narrative was most apparent in the study. Demographic connections in player communication and transculturality aligned more with

characteristics of a game or player's narrative and world setting connecting more to the storytelling aspects of the environment. Massive multiplayer games - in this case MMORPGs - also presented more opportunities for players to form deeper connections with others leading to 3 participants developing social support groups outside of the game's environment. Multiplayer cooperative video games created more focus on gameplay elements that would then lead to more repetitive gameplay sessions outside of the initial meeting. Participants were not as likely to experience aspects of diversity and transculturality in less complex cooperative game experiences. However, the exclusion of narrative and world setting from this genre crafted a focus on gameplay, which was more likely to encompass the personal values of the player outside of the scope of gameplay *taxonomy*.

Table of Data Analysis

Participants	Game Type	Characteristics of Game and Player	Demographics In Comms.	Transculturality	Social Support Group
Player 1	1-4 Co-Op	Gameplay, Narrative	N	N	N
Player 2	Massive Multiplayer	Narrative, World Setting (Y)	Y	Y	Y
Player 3	1-4 Co-Op	Gameplay	N	Y	N
Player 4	Massive Multiplayer	Narrative, World Setting (Y)	Y	N	Y
Player 5	Massive Multiplayer	Narrative, World Setting	N	N	N

Player 6	1-4 Co-Op	Gameplay, Narrative (Y)	N	N	Y

Discussion

The research participants of this study, in relation to research question 1, examined the primary variables of gameplay characteristics and/or mechanics, demographics, transculturality, and the existence of a social support group. These results can explain the attributes of each player's interpersonal communication depending on what the key variables of the study were. Shared experiences in massive multiplayer and cooperative game settings were the dominant genre for connecting with other players in this study. Much of these connections were then related to the narrative of the environment, gameplay mechanics like customization, complex or simple challenges and other personality attributes, or the 'world setting' as in the game's environment building upon a changing virtual space. This then created a direct link to research question 2 where the characteristics of a player in a game then relate to repetitive scenarios players experienced in and out of the virtual space. Identity formation in these interviews were highlighted as a core element of the interpersonal relationship process. After the first communicative approach with another player(s), characteristics in connection to the virtual space were of more value to players than real-life attributes like demographics and ideas of transculturality. In-game characteristics instead formed these identities for players as the virtual space persisted in holding its own ground for diverse identity construction.

The scope of transculturality and diversity in the context of the interpersonal relationships that players formed with others was, as stated previously, not a major factor in excelling beyond

the space of a virtual world. Demographics in diversity primarily applied to the characteristics of players within the game's world while mostly excluding an individual's background behind the character. The cultural aspects of a game's setting and narrative played a more important role in defining character identity while allowing players to connect over similar values that relate their characters or personalities to one another. Aspects of identity were highlighted more in players who have taken part in massive online multiplayer games, while cooperative games featured closer bonds focused on evolving friendship solely through gameplay while developing interpersonal relationships.

Conclusion

This study on video game spaces and interpersonal relationships was created to enhance the understanding of the development of interactions in online game spaces and their key variables amongst players who take part in massive multiplayer or cooperative games. Research into this field has presented multiple avenues of relationships evolving throughout a game's *taxonomical structure* (Delfabbro, Griffiths, 2011) like narrative, gameplay, and the world building. The identification of the theoretical framework's background in the *interaction ritual*, where individuals communicate in social moments of everyday life, as well as *solidarity* for the responsibility of a player's role regarding their characteristics in a virtual space (Liao et al, 2023) were a vital aspect for players forming interpersonal communication online. Instances of attachment through the characteristics of identity and transculturality, while not as substantial in the data analysis, were shown to create dynamic interest throughout the qualitative research process for users who primarily interacted in massive multiplayer environments.

Limitations

Some of the study's limitations include an only a smaller scale of insight as to how expansive interpersonal relationships in online game spaces can be with only 6 participants offering their experiences through the interview process. An additional quantitative research process with more participants would have allowed for a broader overview of the research problem with more accurate conclusions. The framework of the *interaction ritual* and aspects of *solidarity* (Liao et al. 2023) in interpersonal relationships heavily rely on interactions between specific players and their descriptions without input from the players they have met online. Further research to include those of the communicative groups from these online games (via social networking sites) would offer accurate information from the perspective of those players as well. The focus of the literature review's highlights on MMORPGs and cooperative games does hinder the ability to broaden the study to other genres of games that include shared multiplayer experiences with other players. There is the possibility of generalization without the inclusion of other types of multiplayer games. Precise identities into transcultural and demographic backgrounds can create grounds for a more advanced qualitative research process through an inherited plan of research into a player's personal background in relation to gameplay characteristics.

While all of the 6 participants experienced a sense of development in their relationships with other players with only 4 of those players retaining some form of their relationship, those who focused on their time in massive multiplayer games saw a directed focus in demographics and transculturality ideologies forming because of their interactions. Sustainable relationships built on the backbone of gameplay characteristics and identity formation players experienced

within the game at times related to transformative, social support groups where those players have had closer bonds outside of the game's environment after the first meeting. Research in this field has highlighted the positive impacts of online virtual spaces and the importance of identity process through the 'globalization' process and key gameplay elements of the *taxonomical structure* that extend beyond a virtual world's scope. The findings of this research and many others will further improve online virtual spaces for communicative development amongst players as areas of transculturality and diversity can exist within the game while evolving that research into developing interpersonal relationship communities in and out of the context of online video game spaces.

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