

Mediated Intercultural Dialectics: Identity Perceptions and Performances in Virtual Worlds

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As identity has a profound influence on intercultural communication, we explicate a dialectical perspective to identify multiple relationships between new media and identity perception and performance complexities within the context of multidimensional virtual worlds. These mediated intercultural dialectics include the personal-contextual, static-dynamic and privilege-disadvantage dimensions of avatar representations and interactions.

Keywords: Mediated Intercultural Dialectics; Identity; Performances; Virtual Worlds

Identity has a profound influence on intercultural communication, yet its implications for online communities, particularly virtual gaming worlds, are less understood. This essay offers and applies a critical conceptual framework to articulate the multiple links between new media and identities, and identifies gaps for future research. Virtual games are a fruitful context to examine intercultural contact, since their multidimensional platforms with textual and audio capabilities afford synchronous communication and cross-cultural adaptations for interactants (Ward, 2010). Gamers perform instrumental tasks, engage relationally with strangers and maintain community bonds (Nardi & Harris, 2006). Given contemporary multimedia convergence, virtual gaming worlds encompass stand-alone games, multiplayer and massively multiplayer games, massively multiplayer online role-games, and online console gaming. Popular examples include *World of Warcraft*, with more than 12 million subscribers in North America, Europe, and Asia (Peckham, 2010), *EverQuest*, *Final Fantasy*, and *Xbox Live*. Scholarly work needs to focus on

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virtual gamers' participation and experiences beyond players' motivations and addictions. Attention to virtual identity perceptions and performances enriches our understanding of the connections between new media and intercultural communication. Correspondingly, advertence to mediated intercultural dialectics can help unpack the tensions and rewards in virtual world encounters and other related forums.

A dialectical intercultural perspective is a metatheoretical framework that focuses on the simultaneous presence of two relational forces of interaction in recognition of their seemingly opposite, interdependent, and complementary aspects, akin to eastern philosophies on the completion of relative polarities. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin's work on language and culture to advance research beyond traditional paradigms, Martin and Nakayama (1999) explicated dialectics in intercultural communication to refer to the processual, relational and contradictory logics of intercultural knowledge and practices. These include the cultural-individual, personal-contextual, differences-similarities, static-dynamic, history/past-present/future, and privilege-disadvantage dimensions.

Mediated intercultural dialectics are introduced here to draw attention to the fluid relationality between opportunities and challenges, tensions, and uneven gains within virtual world experiences, given the paradoxical and dynamic character of online cultures, as well as our knowledge about communication with cultural "others" (Cheong, Martin, & Macfadyen, *in press*). Intercultural dialectics help highlight differences experienced within groups and individuals to account for identity complexities (Collier, 2005).

The dominant view of online identity focuses on its erasure derived from anonymity and the liberatory manipulation of selves via avatars afforded by computer-mediated-communication. The online gaming environment is posited as a convivial "third place" for intercultural communication (Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Virtual worlds are commonly described as post-racial, in that individuals are able to refigure identities without corporeal constraints (Gunkel & Gunkel, 2009). Yet alternative perspectives exist that regard online identity as embedded, negotiated, and co-created through online interaction (Kennedy, 2006). Common conceptualizations of a free floating and autonomous self are tenuous in light of game play settings. Default settings are biased toward certain iconographical and narrative representations and limited customization options exist. Critical media research shows how digital world structures are engineered to support mounting corporate influences that promote electronic commerce (Brookey, 2009). Virtual worlds are not just utopic, dystopic, or ontologically neutral, as some interactants are attributed less privileged identities and traits. Thus virtual worlds and their complex affordances for self-representations compel attention to the performances of online identities, which are still often constituted through gender, race, class, and other markers of difference (Gajjala, Rybas, & Altman, 2007). The next section discusses the personal-contextual, static-dynamic, and privilege-disadvantage dimensions of gamer identities.

Intercultural Dialectics and Identifications Online

The mediated personal-contextual dialectic involves the role of personal characteristics, as well as contextual features of intercultural relationships, as identity and social roles are enacted in virtual environments to give meaning to online messages. The identification/s created by interactants have certain personal qualities, but emergent tensions can also be experienced with role enactments within game scenarios. For instance, massive multiplayer online games have hierarchical role structures and complex in-group activities (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2007) where members act in specific social forms: for example, (a) mobs formed by players to complete a quest for avatar promotion; (b) raids and five-man groups for challenging tasks; and (c) guilds formed with at least 10 players. These online missions involve individual personality and motivations as well as compliance to group activity, rules, and requirements while playing. This is because putative sanctions regulate guild rankings, membership and recruitment, status and prestige (Kaluza & Golik, 2008). Moreover, the performances of specific social roles in virtual worlds implicate intergroup competence, which entails that social identities be expressed in practices perceived to be appropriate for intergroup interactions (Baldwin & Hunt, 2002). Interactants may experience and need to negotiate in-group/out-group tensions when communicating with fellow players who may be out-group racially but are teammates of a common in-group structure within specific guild activities in gaming.

Contextual features affecting individual and group game participation also interrelate with the static-dynamic dialectic, whereby intercultural communication tends to be at once static and dynamic. Some cultural and communication patterns are relatively stable while other aspects of cultural identification dynamically shift over time. Task performance is a cultural constant in many virtual worlds, although conditions of interactivity may change. Virtual worlds to varying degrees are developed from player-generated content and afford opportunities for the construction of multiple, context-dependent personas. The changeability of player identity is observed in instances where online interactants exploit cues and technological resources within virtual world settings to perform tasks and interact with others while dialogically creating and repositioning their identities (Talamo & Ligorio, 2001). Virtual gaming communities also undergo dynamic change due to the evolution of guild activities that entail creation, development, member suspension, splitting, merging, and disbanding. Thus, both community identity and individual player identities are negotiated between game design features and individual player motivations and interactions (Chen, Hsieh, & Sun, 2008).

Moreover, the mediated privilege-disadvantage dialectic functions when power is negotiated in virtual worlds. This dialectic acknowledges the sociohistorical differentiation of power relations that shape knowledge development and interactions between gamers of different cultural groups and highlights how online interactants may be simultaneously privileged and disadvantaged, or have intersecting identities that are privileged in some contexts and disadvantaged in others. Game

environments have historically reinforced Eurocentric, masculine, hegemonic notions of power, privilege, and inequality (Everett, 2009). This could be due to the power structure of the gaming industry being a predominately white, and secondarily Asian, male-dominated elite.

Recent scholarship highlights that imagery in virtual worlds reinforces certain cultural stereotypes which further deepens extant prejudices toward marginal and minority populations. In terms of gender, female characters are more likely to be represented by partially nude avatars of an unrealistic body type, whereas male characters are more likely to be portrayed as aggressive protagonists (Downs & Smith, 2010). With regard to race, the (in)famous “Leeroy Jenkins” character, created in a parody to promote guild play in *World of Warcraft*, illustrates the racialized stereotypes present when Black avatars are portrayed as unmotivated, ignorant, and destructive (Higgin, 2009). Digital stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims as hostile, cruel, or exotic lead to the erasure of diverse ethnic and religious identities, disadvantaging players who are non-White (Sisler, 2006). Furthermore, an analysis of avatar representations shows a systematic over-representation of males, Whites, and adults and an under-representation of females, Hispanics, Native Americans, children, and the elderly (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, & Ivory, 2009). Kafai, Cook, and Fields (2007) observed that in Whyville, a virtual world for youths aged 8–16 years, players of color posted messages that complained about the lack of Black avatars or mismatched bodies, in which black-faced avatars had white bodies.

Recent scholarship also highlights how stereotypes developed out of linguistic profiling may be recontextualized in virtual worlds and reaffirm old power asymmetries. Linguistic profiling is related to perceptions of language competency. The de facto dominance of the English language as a currency of exchange has historically existed in virtual world settings with participants of diverse linguistic backgrounds (Allwood & Schroeder, 2000), necessitating language socialization for non-native English interactants (Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009). Auto-ethnographic accounts from the standpoint of a female, African American researcher also explain how linguistic profiling leads to hate speech. Gray (2010) reported that gamers seek to determine the racial position of players from language cues. When they cannot, they explicitly question and call out their identity, provoking them via racial stereotypes and labels, instigating conflicts between parties.

Furthermore, linguistic profiling is connected to other factors, like self-identified country of origin, which can affect perceptions of individuals’ identity and capabilities in virtual worlds. For example, in virtual multiplayer interactions, “national guilds” are sometimes founded on perceived linguistic competence. These guilds center on the recruitment of players from similar or select countries as well as, in some instances, banning players from non-English speaking countries (Taylor, 2006). Depending on the context, intercultural collaborations may also be dependent upon ethnic identifications linked to perceived skills and motivation. This is because an “Uber guild” may decide to accept only new members who are perceived to have useful skills and compatible playing styles. Conflicts between European and Asian players in *World of Warcraft* exist when racism is displayed toward (a) Chinese players

who are labeled “farmers” as they are perceived as mercenary interactants playing only to sell their in-game currency, and (b) Indian “e-bays” perceived as lacking skills and motivation because they themselves do not create but purchase highly skilled avatars. Virtual practices paradoxically extend real world inequalities when the purchase of other players’ avatars subsequently suppresses or denies avatarial self-possession by Chinese players (Nakamura, 2009).

Conclusion

In spite of the recent popularity of virtual worlds and the celebratory discourse of increased digital participation, not all online gaming experiences are equitable and beneficial. The mediated intercultural dialectics underpinning virtual interactants’ identity perceptions and performances highlight how the intersectionality of race, class, age, and gender may serve as secondary digital divide factors influencing gamers’ social roles, representations, and compensations. Beyond the bulk of research on entertainment-oriented multiplayer online games, future attention to intercultural dialectics in the emergent genre of more edutainment-style “serious games” can help uncover new patterns of online identifications afforded by new designs, interaction rules, and norms.

Moreover, in light of developments in content integration between older and newer media, dynamics of intercultural communication in virtual worlds might change. Gamers’ anonymity online may become further limited as avatar identity is traceable to multiple self-identifications constructed in highly accessible and visible platforms, including location-based social media and mobile services. Thus, future research whereby individuals in an online intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, and/or challenge their own and others’ self-representations may further illuminate identity negotiation and its associations with co-located gamers’ trust, privacy, and offline power dynamics. Given the range of initiatives concerned with building inclusive and safe social spaces online, more emic research could examine intercultural conflicts like flaming, griefing, and sexual harassment associated with identity in virtual worlds. Finally, research could further explore communication among non-Western communicators given the globalization of virtual worlds.

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