

The Unknown Player:

Accommodation Behaviour in Real-Time Strategy Gaming Communities

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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Playing computer games is a hobby shared by many people of different national and cultural backgrounds worldwide. Therefore, it fits well as a testing ground for intercultural communication theory. This qualitative study applied the communication accommodation theory (Gallois & Giles, 2015) in a computer mediated gaming environment of the real time strategy game Company of Heroes. During the course of four weeks, a total of 44 datasets were collected in order to research: a) how players accommodate each other during interaction, b) how the game environment and structural framework influence players' communication, c) how players construct an in-game identity, and finally, d) how players cope with the absence of physical and visual cues in a game. The data consists of pre-game and in-game chat logs and the researcher's own notes concerning the situational in-game context. Analysis indicates that the communication accommodation theory is applicable in this new environment. However, some of its components are not fitting, are missing, or must be reinterpreted. The findings suggest that the accommodation behaviour is dependent on players' displayed identity, player-to-player relationships and the scripts of play like e.g. game settings. In an environment, where players are not represented by a visual avatar, the identity cues shift from physical and visual towards imaginary ones such as pseudonyms or experience. Finally, this study shows that communication accommodation theory can also be applied in the context of computer mediated game communication, opening it to a whole new application environment.</p>	
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Introduction

Scientific research in the field of Intercultural Communication (ICC) is very diverse and might reach out into many different research disciplines in order to reveal new interdisciplinary connections. The initial idea of this study emerged from my desire to explore newer, more prosperous application areas for ICC theories with a strong connection to activity-based communication in everyday life. The field of online gaming seemed to be a good match for these specifications. Playing online computer games has grown to become one of the largest hobbies in the past years (Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung, 2017; Roland, 2017). With the help of the internet, gaming connects players all around the world making it a melting pot for people of different cultural backgrounds, identities, nationalities, languages, genders, and ages. Players normally take part in online games with the shared goal of having a good time.

Interaction might be understood as a synonym for communication. Therefore, it seems to have become even more interesting to explore this complex process with the help of science. The aim of this study soon transformed towards the experiment to unravel the communication process beyond the aspect of play interaction. Thereby, the focus of interest became how people communicate in-game with each other and what are the influencing factors of this interlocution.

While playing, players also develop an own game related character. This personal player identity is another influence on the player to player interaction. In a computer mediated communication (CMC), identity is always product of a self-chosen disclosure and mainly affected by the self-presentation. The displayed player identity, or in-game identity, might also determine how players perceive each other. In an effort to interact with each other, players must somehow accommodate to each other during the communication process.

To explore this accommodation process further, the communication accommodation theory (CAT) by Gallois and Giles (2015), was chosen as the theoretical framework for this

study. CAT has barely been applied in the context of game related CMC, meaning that I will also aim to test whether it works within this rather new environment.

The proximity of this study is the real time strategy game (RTS) *Company of Heroes* (CoH), as the genre of RTS seemed to be underrepresented in game related studies. CoH does not support a visual proxy such as an avatar unlike many other massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Therefore, there are no interferences of any visual or haptic identity cues when playing CoH. This also makes it possible to explore how people cope with this structural gap and how this might affect CAT.

To gain a close-up insight into the communication behaviour of players, I conducted this qualitative study from an ethnographic perspective. This allowed me to observe player interaction from the viewpoint of a community member. I will thereby research how players express identity, how they communicate in the in-game chat messages, and how the playstyle affects the player relations.

I divided this study into six chapters. Chapter one is dedicated to the theoretical approach on the research topic. It will explain the concepts of CMC, CAT, and the application of both theories in recent studies. Chapter two will illustrate the game environment of CoH to the reader. The following third chapter will disclose the methodological approach of this study, revealing the underlying research questions, the approach to the game, the data collection process, and its limitations. It will also exemplify what the collected data looked like. Chapter four reveals my findings, it will describe in detail the process of identity construction, the relevance of player-to-player relationships, and the influence of certain gameplay setting onto communication accommodation. The conclusions of this study will be presented in chapter five along with a discussion of CAT and, to what extent, it is applicable in the context of an online game environment, as well as, answers to the initial research questions. Chapter five will close with a prospect of how the findings may have a repercussion for CAT itself. Finally, in chapter

six I will evaluate the research process, finishing with a proposal of ideas and concepts for future research in the area.

1. Theoretical Approach

Within this study, I try to commit to the scientific dialogue of Intercultural Communication, and therefore attempt to explore a new application area for an already used theory. Thereby, I try to find out if the Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) can be successfully applied in a new environment.

As already mentioned the context is the space of online gaming and this study wants to explore, with the help of CAT, how players accommodate each other during communication with the limited information they have about each other. Thereby, the application of CAT gets a new twist: the theory has been used successfully in interpersonal/intergroup face-to-face (FtF) contexts but rarely in the context of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC).

1.1. Computer Mediated Communication

CMC can essentially be summarized to “any human communication achieved through or with the help of computer technology” (Thurlow, Lengel, & Tomic, 2012, p. 26). Thus, CMC related research has been around since the very beginning of computer technology itself in the 1950’s. The peak of CMC research occurred after the dawn of the online computing-age in the 1980s. Essential CMC scholars like Santoro (1995), December (1997), or Herring (1996) concur that the applications and impacts of computer and digital technologies play a major role in CMC research. It can be highlighted that the lowest common denominator of all CMC related research today is interpersonal communication on, through, and about the internet (Thurlow et al., 2012). Nevertheless, other mediation technologies for instance the telephone,

fax, or video chats have been also associated with CMC (Short et al., 1976), even though the mediation role of computer technology in it might not be that obvious on the first glimpse.

Through this thesis, I attempted to find out if the CAT still works when almost all interfering haptic cues from communication between players in a non-face-to-face context have been removed. The question of the influence of visible cues is even more important in the context of a real-time strategy (RTS) game where players are not even virtually represented by some sort of proxy like an avatar in-game. Even though the absence of nonverbal cues can be seen as the essential divide between FtF and online interaction (Kiesler, 1987; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Mc Guire 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986), I also tried to consider the ideas of Social Information Processing (SIP) (Walther, 1992) to observe whether they are just expressed in a different way.

After the introduction of the CMC based context of this study it is time to explain the components of CAT.

1.2. Communication Accommodation Theory

History and Development of CAT

Howard Giles can be counted as the inventor of CAT. When he first started working on the theory, he was strongly influenced by Henry Tajfel and John Turner's (1986) work on the social identity theory (SIT). In fact, Henry Tajfel was one of Giles mentors during his years at the graduate school of the University of Bristol. The origins of CAT are lying in the experience of Giles himself, who noted that he consciously and unconsciously switched to different English accents when visiting different regions of the UK. He noticed, that he was doing this to converge better into the group of people he was with (Giles, 2016).

In his early work, Giles (1973) already distinguished the communication mechanisms of accent convergences and divergence. Thereby he was also inspired by Labov's (1966) work

on social stratification of the English language in New York. Labov discovered that the formality of a situation increased just from talking about a colloquial topic.

During the first, foundational phase of the theory in the late sixties, the focus was on the observation of people shifting their dialects. It was also monitored how bilinguals switch their languages regularly in certain directions at certain rates (Giles & Smith, 1979; Gallois & Giles, 1998). Furthermore, the outcome of speech convergence was conceptualized, and the role of speech accommodation was recognized as an integral component of language attitude (Giles & Powesland, 1975).

In the late nineteen seventies, the second “intergroup/contextual phase” (Giles, 2016, p. 4) set its focus on divergence and nonaccommodation as mechanic of social differentiation. Thereby, SIT had a major influence on the development of CAT (Giles, 1978). The social conditions necessary to differ communication on a larger scale also lead to the development of the ethnolinguistic identity theory (Giles & Johnson, 1981) which itself inspired many later models (e.g. the intergroup model of second language acquisition, Giles & Byrnes, 1982).

The third “subjectivist phase” (Giles, 2016, p. 4) set in during the early eighties. In this period, CAT’s structure was developed to get a better grasp of the antecedent conditions under which accommodative/nonaccommodative acts surfaced. Furthermore, it was used to explain the social consequences arising from this very process (Giles, Gallois, & Anderson, 2007). The main insight of this phase was that speakers accommodate rather to where they believed to be communicatively, than where “the others” are (Thakerar, Giles, & Cheshire, 1982).

A fourth phase of development began in the mid-eighties and included the sphere of integrational communication health-related topics into the theory (e.g. Giles, Coupland & Giles, 1991). It focussed on underaccommodating moves and overaccommodating moves e.g. in the communication between older and younger people. Giles, Davis, and Gasiorek (2013) found that accommodation mis-moves can cause integrational dissatisfaction and avoidance, as well as lowered self-worth, planted life satisfaction, an accelerated demise.

The fifth research and development phase set in during the late eighties and is referred to as the “communicative breadth phase” (Giles, 2016, p. 5). During this time, convergence and divergence were conceived as some of many ways in which people either accommodate or do not. A wider focus also acknowledged interpretability strategies, in which communicators consider each other’s knowledge on the conversational topic and the communicative needs. Furthermore, communicators’ discourse management and interpersonal control strategies were observed during this phase. This led to the conclusion that speakers can converge and diverge simultaneously to fulfil their social and identity needs (Giles, 2016).

The last phase of advancement of CAT, set in around 2006, and can be described as the “mediating mechanism phase” (Giles, 2016. p.5). During this time, it was researched how emotions like irritation, pride, or joy might get triggered by accommodation and how they influence the evaluative and behavioural reactions of the interlocutors (Dorjee, Giles, & Barker, 2011). In addition, the attention was shifted towards the question how attributed intent may influence listener’s reaction and accommodation. Myers, Giles, Reid and Nabi (2008) found, that nonaccommodation does not necessarily trigger a negative evaluation of another’s attributes. Rather, it can be mediated by a negative effect that it arouses (e.g. frustration and anger) (Myers, Giles, Reis, & Nabi, 2008).

Now that we know how CAT has developed in the past 40 years, this paper will introduce the actual theoretical framework. Therefore, this paper explains the mechanisms of CAT based on the summary of the theory done by Gallois and Giles and published in an article in 2015.

Integral Parts of CAT

In the following part, this paper will explain CAT by presenting the six major features it consists of: a) the sociohistorical context, b) initial orientation, c) accommodative stance, d) immediate context, e) sociolinguistic strategies, and f) conversational tactics, evaluations, and future intentions.

The Sociohistorical Context. First, it is worth noting that all interactions seem to take place within a context, influenced by a larger society around the interactants. Thereby, the intergroup context of the interaction may be so strong, that the interactants are rather influenced and driven by it than by individual motives. Gallois and Giles (2015) give the conversation between an Arab resident of the West Bank and an Israeli border guard as an example: the conversation tends to be marked rather by divergence due to the social pressure on both interactants. Even in this extreme example of intergroup context, there are possibilities for accommodative actions as e.g. peace activists of both sides show. Even the language switch to Arabic by the Israeli border guard during conversation with the Arab might have an enormous accommodative impact.

A second example given by Gallois and Giles (2015) underlines, that the interactants might not even be aware of the influencing intergroup pressure during their communication. A sexist joke or remark in a conversation between two romantic partners might switch the nature of the interaction to an intergroup conversation (i.e. between men and women). This may lead to a nonaccommodative turn of the talk or even conflictual behaviour. Social identities are continually negotiated and might change at any moment as the context changes. The same dynamic works for communication accommodation as interactants change their positioning during conversations to become more or less intergroup. This happens when people successfully dismiss intergroup pressure and act as members of a larger group (e.g. profession, company, country) so that accommodation can take place. (Gallois & Giles, 2015)

Initial Orientation: Motives, Goals, and Immediate Context. Both, intergroup and interpersonal histories influence our orientation towards others prior to an encounter. Normally, humans want to have positive interaction, especially when we like the other person, or when we share a good history, or if a good deal is at stake. Sometimes we are forced to accommodate. Gallois and Giles (2015) give the context of a job interview as example: to get the job, we want to impress, even if the whole situation is uncomfortable. This example also

adds to the assumption that we normally approach interaction with a certain goal or orientation. Those might range from receiving something particular, like getting a job, or something less conscious like having a good time. In these cases, we tend to approach the interaction motivated to become friendly and positive (i.e. to accommodate to the other person or people). This stance normally stays until negative interpersonal or intergroup elements appear.

Accommodation might not always be noticeable in behaviour: people may accommodate psychologically but lack the skills to show this in their behaviour. Furthermore, Gallois and Giles (2015) point out that, in some forms of intergroup communication, convergence might not be as accommodative as divergence. In these cases, people communicate in a complementary way e.g. when they consult an expert like a lawyer to get a high-quality advice. In this example, the most accommodative behaviour for both people might be to stay within their roles. This needs the divergent behaviour of one or both participants. Finally, there is a distinction between upward and downward accommodation or nonaccommodation. Thus, the accommodation motives for persons with a higher (social) status are different from those with a lower or equal status. (Gallois & Giles, 2015)

Accommodative Stance. As noted above, we start out most interactions with a friendly intend. The default orientation is an *accommodative stance*, “to adjust behaviour in order to take account of the other’s needs, desires, and behaviour, and to treat the other person more as an individual and less as a group member” (Gallois & Giles, 2015, p. 7). There might also be interactions motivated by intergroup or interpersonal conflict, calling for a nonaccommodative stance. Such situations require “to communicate more as a group member, and to take less account of the other’s needs, desires, and behaviours” (Gallois & Giles, 2015, p. 7).

According to Gallois and Giles (2015), there are several different *nonaccommodative* stances: The first and most obvious one is *counteraccommodation* expressed in conflictual or

hostile communication. Even if divergence is a good example *counteraccommodation* there are far more ways to interact alongside this stance. To name a few, one can e.g. dominate the conversation, use depreciating language or communication, or might even threaten the other person's face (Oetzel & Ting-Toomey, 2003). Despite this, *counteraccommodation* is a very uncommon stance because it violates general norms of communicational and social behaviour. When it occurs, it has a strong impact (Gallois & Giles, 2015).

The second stance is *overaccommodation*. Intended or even unintended, this stance is often motivated by the desire to accommodate. This stance is for example often used in an of intergenerational context: *overaccommodation* is thereby motivated by the good intention to speak a more proper language for the understandability and appreciation of the other person. Such a behaviour is often based on negative stereotypes about the other person's group. In the given example by Gallois and Giles (2015), older people are often expected to have difficulties in hearing or that they need simple language for an easier understanding. Younger people may e.g. tend to overaccommodate in the usage 'elderspeak', rather than pay attention to the actual needs of the older person.

In contrast to overaccommodation, *underaccommodation*, can be described as the third stance of nonaccommodation. In this stance, the person's own (group's) language and communication are maintained or exaggerated to disadvantage the other. Such a behaviour is often perceived as a milder form of divergence (in contrast to counteraccommodation) and its negative outcome. Gallois and Giles (2015) give a teacher-student conversation as an example: The teacher, driven by the desire to keep the students in their place, uses technical terms and concepts the students have not learned yet to express his advantage in knowledge. As a result, the teacher might become very unpopular amongst the students.

Finally, Gallois and Giles (2015) mention the appearance of a few accommodational stances, which have been recently studied. Such as, *exploitative accommodation* which involves motives mainly driven by self-interest. An applicant might copy the speech or ideas of high-

status people to suggest integration in order to get a job. This concept enables researchers to examine the interplay between motivation and behaviour. A similar approach, coming from intergenerational communication, might be found in *avoidant accommodation*. In this example people may accommodate to older adults by avoiding problems. Like in exploitative accommodation, avoidant accommodation takes the other's needs and behaviour into account. The interaction, however, is driven by treating them as group members rather than individuals.

Immediate Context. Gallois and Giles (2015) clarify, that every interaction must take place in a certain context. This might be a place and time with associated social norms, roles, and rules. Thus, language and behaviour differ and strongly influence the accommodative stances we take e.g. in a pub, sporting venue, or at university. As an example, an extreme racist is likely to moderate his/her nonaccommodative behaviour in work context, in order to meet the norms. His/her stance does not necessarily change, but if his/her behaviour is realized, then probably just in a subtle form. In contrast, a context with a huge power difference between the interactants (e.g. an interaction between a guard and a prisoner), might have a clear scope for nonaccommodative behaviour.

Sociolinguistic strategies. Alongside accommodative stances, and the actual behaviours, CAT also contains a multitude of strategies, working as connections between these two essential parts. Gallois and Giles (2015) point out, that these strategies are far from being deterministic, but they are influencing the way people behave and how this behaviour appears to others. Convergence, divergence, and maintenance can thereby be counted as *approximation strategies*. It presupposes our attention to the behaviour of others and includes the choice whether to adjust our own behaviour to be more or less like the other's. For example, *approximation* is the most common strategy in bi- or multilingual interaction, where we face the choice of maintaining our own language, switching it to the other's, or even to a third, shared, language. Within this consideration, we also take into account the other's level of language, jargon, and if they are able to understand us.

This might even influence the choice of the right topic and vocabulary to meet the other's needs. To give an example, adults have to accommodate their communicational behaviour in conversation with children (Gallois & Giles, 2015). Such a choice might represent the *interpretability strategy* and is dominant in educational contexts, and when dealing with newcomers.

Furthermore, *discourse management strategies* are influencing our way to attend to the conversational structure. They also drive the wish for a fair and equal distribution of talking time, the right to influence the topics, and the development of the conversation. Finally, they also determine the influence on how conversation starts, and how it ends (Gallois & Giles, 2015).

In addition, *interpersonal control strategies* are used, when there is a difference in power distributions between the communicators. This strategy describes, how the person with higher power allows the person with lower power to act as individual rather than part of a group or role during interaction. Gallois and Giles (2015) give the example of a boss addressing his driver by name rather than by his role ("Mr. Smith" rather than "Driver"), or by engaging in small talk.

Finally, interactants may attend to the *relational needs* of others, e.g. by (not) offering support in a personal crisis (Gallois & Giles, 2015).

Conversational Tactics, Perceptions, Evaluations, and Future Intentions. The final components of CAT are conversational tactics along with perceptions, evaluations, and future intentions. As Gallois and Giles (2015) describe, most of the earlier stated processes take place outside conscious awareness. Since the sociohistorical, interpersonal, and immediate contexts are an essential part of every communication accommodation, *conversational tactics* "highlight the dynamic and nonreflective aspects of communication accommodation" (Gallois & Giles, 2015, p. 10).

Thereby, the chosen *conversational tactics* refer to our immediate response on communication by others and to our own behaviour. They are a) guided by an initial orientation and accommodative stance, and b) constrained, but not determined, by the immediate context. To clarify this, Gallois and Giles (2015) give the example of getting pulled over by a police officer in a traffic control. First, the intergroup context in this situation might be mixed, since the driver might have an overall positive view of the police forces. He also suspects them in a stereotypic manner to be abusive of their power. Even though, there might be no interpersonal history between the driver and the police officer, the driver has a clear idea how to behave in a traffic stop context (based on previous experience and from TV shows). His initial orientation is an avoidant accommodation by being polite, speaking as the officer speaks, and staying within his role. The officer might surprise the driver by being friendlier than anticipated and referring to the driver by his name and speaking in plain language. As soon as the driver notices this, he might switch to a more accommodative behaviour, e.g. by giving the driver the lead in the conversation, smiling, thanking him, or even treating him as individual as possible. Even though the police officer gives the driver a ticket for driving too fast, they part on good terms. Most of the process happened unconsciously to the driver and might not change his accommodative stance at all. The procedure had a clear effect on the driver's observable behaviour, it changed in reaction to the police officer's behaviour as (unconscious) part of accommodative tactics.

Other dynamic features which have an impact on immediate interaction are *perceptions and reactions*. We normally notice people's behaviour and make assumption of its meaning. Even if we usually interpret the motives and attitudes of others, we usually do not check them out. Normally, accommodative behaviour like convergence is perceived positively and thereby attributed to friendliness, respect, and happiness. On the other hand, nonaccommodative behaviour is normally perceived in a negative manner and has a very negative influence on the *evaluation* of an interaction (Gallois & Giles, 2015).

Underaccommodation and counteraccommodation are also widely perceived negatively as signs of dislike or a lack of respect. Same goes for overaccommodation. The latter is equally interpreted as patronizing and thus, disrespectful (Gallois & Giles, 2015).

Immediate reactions and perceptions cause an overall evaluation of a conversation as positive or negative and influence the *future intentions* for interactions with a person or other members of the person's group. According to Gallois and Giles (2015) a large amount of research shows "that we are quick to generalize nonaccommodative behaviour and negative perceptions to a whole social group" (Gallois & Giles, 2015, pp. 11-12). If the conversation outcome with such a person is positive, we tend to make an exception of this conversational partner, rather than changing our view of the whole group. Furthermore, we try to confirm preceding impressions which slows down our ability to incorporate surprising positive behaviour into future intentions. On the other hand, we tend to be very quick incorporating surprising negative behaviour to them (Gallois & Giles, 2015).

1.3. Recent Application of Context Related Ideas

As already mentioned above, one of the aspects which led me to this study was the fact that CAT has not yet been fully used in the CMC context of online gaming. Even if the theory as whole has not been applied yet in this context some of its components have. Multiple scholars have researched terms such as, *accommodation* or *identity* in a wider online (gaming) community context.

Games and CMC

Looking at the interconnection of game studies and CMC, a strong intersection can be predicted between both fields. Multiplayer interactions normally happen online and therefore all communication is inevitable computer mediated. The following section demonstrates how different Scholars have recently approached the area of CMC to explore a multitude of nuances.

As such, CMC was used to investigate the context of online-game addiction. A study on the role of CMC motives on game addiction (Liu & Chang, 2016) found that mediated motives like entertainment, passing time, and escape are the major influence on the flow experiences. The flow again affects the addiction. Interpersonal motives like social interaction and coplaying also have a strong impact on the addiction experience.

The importance of communication style has also been explored based on CMC. For example, a study examined the reasons for, and results of, 'flaming' in football related YouTube vlogs. Flaming describes the unrestrained and excessive usage of negative language. This aggressive form of expression is strongly impacted by the sender's cultural background and may have a lasting effect on the message perception (Gully, 2012). Flaming was also researched in the context of cyber bullying and violence in online games (Lam, Cheng & Liu, 2013). Misconducted online communication can even have a lasting effect on aspects like friendship satisfaction, self-esteem, life satisfaction and social competences (Leung & McBride-Chang, 2013).

Gender experiences in games is another topic which has recently been covered by CMC related research. A study by Lee (2004) demonstrated that players tend to categorize their conversation partners according to the displayed gender. Furthermore, in the anonymous environment of CMC players seem to rely on the display of stereotypes when it comes to gender identification (Herring & Martinson, 2004). Like cyber bullying, sexual harassment has been another topic which has recently been researched. Behavioural patterns of harassers and victims have been researched based on game related CMC (Norris, 2004; Tang & Fox, 2016). A study by Fox and Tang (2017) even explored how women cope with harassment in online games. They found that many victims react with gender bending or gender neutralization by choosing a certain in-game name or avatar, avoiding communication or seeking social support inside and outside the game.

The idea that communities of online games play a vital role can be illustrated by the (communicational) struggles to coordinate with fellow players online. A study by Williams and Kirschner (2012) demonstrates the necessary collaborative effort to achieve a certain community goal. The study found that players can succeed in a shared quest even if the players are not physically copresent during their efforts. The leadership and organizational skills needed to organize such a task are thereby comparable to those of virtual team members from global organizations (Sivunen & Siitonen, 2010). Both, leaders of online communities like game-clans and leaders of virtual teams need active communication and coordination abilities to unify their task group. The shared experience or group memory plays also strongly impacts the group's success. Kahn and Williams (2016) found that in strategic online games like League of Legends past acquaintanceships between players influence the prediction of game interactions and outcome.

This short introduction of different approaches to game-based CMC the complexity and variety of the topic. My findings will show that many aspects of this study correspond with research results in this sector. Beforehand it is necessary to review the research efforts in the area of online communication accommodation.

Communication Accommodation Online

Even if there is a remarkable absence of a direct application of CAT in context of game studies, it has been recently applied to research on communication behaviour in non-gaming CMC context. I will show later in this study that the findings of recent studies are comparable with the findings of this paper. It seems that members of gaming and non-gaming communities are much alike in their accommodative behaviour.

As one of the main tasks of this paper is to explore the accommodative behaviour between players of a particular online game, it is helpful to look at the way online accommodation was approached by researchers recently. Thus, it becomes apparent that CAT

enables to explore the multitude of accommodation factors in online communication, and their impact on individuals' and communities' identity (Hordila & Pana, 2010).

CAT can also be used to explain language accommodation processes of interlocutors during online negotiations to achieve a positive outcome through a linguistic convergence (Huffaker, Swaab & Diermeier, 2011). A similar behaviour of communication style accommodation between students of different ethnic backgrounds could also be observed within the exchange of e-mails (Hansen & Stehle, 2015). Furthermore, as CAT suggests, the social power relation between the interlocutors plays a major role in most conversations. This also seems to apply to online conversations, as a study by Mui, Joinson, Cotterill and Dewdney (2017) found. A power slope between two parties may also have in CMC a direct influence on the linguistic style of the language.

Identity in Online Games

Since personal and social identity play a major role in CAT during the communication it is vital to explore how it influences or is influenced by the process. For the groundwork of this study it is again essential to see how researches have tried to approach this critical component in the context of online gaming in the younger past.

It is worth to keep in mind that the perception of one's virtual identity might also influence one's offline identity as it was recently shown by a study conducted by Bergstrom, Fisher, and Jenson (2016). The study found that players of massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) tend to frame their own identity if they are confronted with satirical stereotypes about gamers in general. Furthermore, many games enable players to extend their identity by swapping their gender. Such an undertaking needs some visualization of the virtual self. Gender swap may be an attempt to express oneself in diverse ways. It seems that preferably male players like to play female characters e.g. in massively MMORPGs (Paik & Shi, 2013).

The in-game identity relies to some extent on the offline identity of the player. Martin (2012) found that in-game identities reflect the player's skill level in-game, their playstyle, and

the information practices they use offline (e.g. in school). On the contrary, developing an in-game identity might not necessarily be connected to the offline identity of the player. Instead, the computer-mediated communication between players might be based on their behaviour as 'normal' Internet users (Bates, 2009).

That symbolic interactions between players have a major impact on both, the virtual identity and the shape of online communities can be seen in a study by Hernández and Alvarado (2009) conducted in the environment of World of Warcraft. Furthermore, the possibilities of interaction strongly influence the way gamers tend to present their online selves in games. The self-presentation drive not only generates trust in online games but might also lead to a greater commitment to gamers and gaming-communities (Parks & Chung, 2011).

Furthermore, the affiliation to certain virtual communities/factions may also influence the way of intergroup communication. The in-game social identity might directly influence players' commitment to a faction and their positioning during intergroup conflicts. Thus, players who are biased towards only one group/faction might be more committed to it than players who occasionally swap it (Mancini, Balestrieri & Sibilla, 2018). It seems that identification within the community might also be created through a normative pressure on the player by the collective (Hsu, Chiang & Huang, 2012). This might ultimately also influence the playstyle, the way players engage with each other, and how they see and present themselves.

That game-chat communication behaviour of players can be successfully set into relation with offline communication behaviour has been proven by Ryumshira, Pishchik, and Breus (2016). They made visible that conflicts and e.g. power struggles happen and are resolved in online and offline communities in very similar ways. In addition, they have a major impact on both, communication behaviour and the interlocutors' identity.

After revealing the underlying theoretical framework of my study, and its connection to the present paper, it is time to take a closer look at the background in which the research was conducted.

2. The Case – Company of Heroes

The case environment of this study is Company of Heroes, a real time strategy game developed by the games-software company Relic Entertainment and published by THQ. The base game was released 12.9.2006 (US), 29.9.2006 (EU).



Figure 1. Screenshot of CoH's main menu.

The game is set during the Second World War and the base game contained two different playable factions: The Allies and the Axis. Within the factions, players can choose between the US Army and the Wehrmacht. In the game players aim to capture strategic resource sectors across the map in order to build new base structures and units and ultimately overcome the opponent. The game was widely celebrated after its release and received multiple game of the year awards in 2006 (PC Gamer, GameSpot, IGN). Until today its rated the best real time strategy game on the review aggregator Game Rankings. Thanks to the success of the game, there were published two addons: Opposing Fronts in 2007 and Tales of Valor in 2009. Opposing Fronts thereby added two more playable factions: The Commonwealth for the Allies and the Panzer Division Lehr for the Axis. Tales of Valor simply added a few exchangeable units and new multiplayer game modes.

Originally the game had its own implemented client, in which every player had an own account, logging onto the game servers hosted by relic entertainment. In these times every player had personal profile, linked to this in-game account. This changed when the owner of relic entertainment, THQ got in financial troubles in 2012 (vrzone 6.11.2012; CGW 21.12.2012). The properties of THQ got sold off in the beginning of 2013, and Sega bought the Company of Heroes franchise (Kotaku 23.1.2013). In the follow up, relic decided to transfer the game from its own client to the gaming platform Steam within a short transition time. This meant that the original relic servers went offline on 7.5.2013 after almost seven years (PC GAMER 23.4.2013). Even though it was possible to continue playing online on Steam, this event meant a cesura for every online player because the personal profile from relic online was lost in transition.

Everybody had to start from scratch with all its advantages and disadvantages. Especially in the early times on Steam it was a big equalization, and nobody knew the true potential of the other players. For quite some time it was almost impossible to determine from the profile whether other players were veterans or newbies. Furthermore, some features and services of the online lobby were lost totally. Before Steam, every player had a military rank symbol, visually representing their skill level with the current faction next to the nickname.

This enabled players to easily determine the skills of the counterpart, even without getting to deep into the profile statistics.



Figure 2. Screenshot of the game lobby.

Another feature that stopped working properly, was the in-game news feed, which stayed empty ever since the transition, in some way representing the downfall of the game with its slowly decreasing player community. Even though, the community notably profited a couple of times from steam-sales with a short-term increase of total players (5.392 August 2015, 5.539 June 2017, 5.845 February 2018). However, this cannot deny the fact that that the monthly average lies around 3.090 players online with a slow but clear downside trend.¹

Thanks to the success of CoH, Sega released with Company of Heroes 2 a sequel on 25. June 2013. CoH 2 was a highly controversial title since it differed a lot in terms of game mechanics and implemented lots of microtransactions which not only applied cosmetics but also tactical advantages which could be purchased for real money. Therefore, many fans of the original series were disappointed by the twist of the sequel and never really migrated to the

¹ Statistics from steam analysis app, *Steam Charts*, retrieved from <http://steamcharts.com/app/228200#All>

community of the second part. In terms of total players online, there is also a negative trend recognizable. From the initial all-time peak of 20.747 players in May 2013 the game shifted towards 6.320 players in April 2018.²



Figure 3. Screenshot of the pre-game lobby.

People which chose to play with each other find a variety of options to do so. CoH still provides the possibility of ranked games in which players are anonymously connected to each other by the game-algorithms according to their skill-level, their chosen faction and their chosen player-amount settings (1vs.1, 2vs.2, 3vs.3, 4vs.4). In this multiplayer game mode, the pre-game communication is very limited as players cannot communicate with each other before they are in-game. Therefore, I decided to concentrate on the second available multiplayer game-mode. In this game mode, players can host the games themselves, choosing the battle-map, game name, game settings and are able to see the joint players in the game before the battle starts. Thereby, they are also able to communicate with each other at the pre-game lobby. CoH also provides a multiplayer chat-lobby where players can communicate with all players online.

² Ibid. <http://steamcharts.com/app/231430#All>

Due to the multitude of available chatrooms inside this lobby, this communication channel has become more and more marginal over the years. Players seem to prefer exchanging messages in the pre-game lobby of the game of their choice. As there are different game-modes, players can choose between a) classic-match to contest over victory points or go for total annihilation, b) one of the ‘operation’ mini-game modes, or c) a simple skirmish against an AI opponent.

Through all the ups and downs of the game I have been an observer and an active part of the community. While interacting and communicating with a large entity of players in CoH at some point the question emerged if CoH could be used as a case to use ICC theories in a new background.

After the theoretical background has been introduced and the environment in which the study took place has been explained, it is time to present the methodological approach. In the following chapter, I will first present the initial research questions, followed by the steps that were taken to gather the data for this study. Finally, the chapter will also embrace some limitations of this research.



Figure 4. Screenshot of an in-game battle scene with chatter (left).

3. Methodological Approach

As this paper introduced in chapter 1, most of the recent CAT related research in a CMC environment was either done in a non-gaming related surrounding or explored the influence of identity in MMORPGs where players have some sort of visual proxy. This sort of avatar might just shift the influence of physical cues in offline communication towards virtual-physical cues in online communication (e.g. Li, Nguyen, Cheng & Teng, 2018; Martey & Consalvo, 2011). For this study, the case-environment of an RTS game removes this sort of physicality to explore if the accommodation process is anyway similar or what might be influencing factors instead. Building the study around this focus, a set of research question had to be answered.

3.1. Research Questions

- How do players accommodate to each other during a computer-mediated interaction in an RTS?
- How is communication adjusted by the structural-framework of the game-environment?
- How do players construct an in-game identity in CoH?
- How do players cope with the absence of visual/physical cues in an RTS?

3.2. Methodological Approach to the Topic

This study is mainly based on an ethnographic approach to the topic, meaning that I, as someone who had already interacted for years within the environment of CoH, came back to it equipped with the skills obtained during my intercultural communication studies as an observer and a member of the community at the same time. Like Mortensen (2018) stated in her work, there are two ways to understand play, either through observation or through participation. While some play-interactions are easily observable others can only be explored by participating in the play. She argues that to fully understand and explain the worlds of online, multi-user games, one must experience it first-hand.

Ethnography as scientific method was recently used to explore sociological issues, interaction, identity, memory and mediation in the medium of online games. As Helen Thornham (2011) pointed out, game ethnography allows science to re-approach topics like communication or the relationships between gender and power. She points out, that an ethnographic approach goes beyond the field of game studies as it helps to understand how we mediate technology and media in our every day's life. Furthermore, scholars like Wirman (2014) emphasised the use game ethnography in the context of cultural studies to highlight the importance of gender and national identity in the construction of player identity.

Other scientists like Christine Hine even (2008) went further by pointing out the contradiction of science relies on modern technology but knows little about the effect of computing on their work. Applying ethnography in the context of cyberscience, creates new insights into virtual culture, communication practices, and the complex dynamics of change. All in the context of new technologies. Hine claimed that it is essential to consider the multitude of complex pressures of contemporary science, to fully understand the impact of information and communication technology.

With a clear focus on communication and identity related research in the context of a game and its community, the possibilities of an ethnographic approach promised to bring the best results. In my initial research I was inspired by the work of Celia Pearce (2009), who argued that a qualitative ethnographic approach is quite productive for researching game culture as it enables the researcher to observe the community from within. This perspective perfectly described my own case as a long-time player of CoH. Furthermore, the methodology seemed to be the most thriving one in the context of game studies (e.g. Taylor 1999, Steinkuehler & Squire 2006). Therefore, I also decided to take this methodological approach for this study, based on observation and participation. It allowed me to analyse the influences on communication and outcome of interaction first-hand.

Company of Heroes was chosen for two major reasons: First, as shown in chapter 2, the game is a very significant representative of the RTS genre. Not only is it a widely recognized game, but the fact that it still has an active community speaks for it as research subject. Furthermore, the nature of the whole pre-game setting, in which players can consciously interact with each other made it an interesting case, as many other strategy games do not support this kind of lobby anymore in the same wise (e.g. League of Legends, CoH 2)

The second reason was based on the already mentioned familiarity with the game and its community. As many RTS games became almost extinct (e.g. the Command and Conquer or the Warcraft RTS franchises) CoH is still alive after more than 10 years. Therefore, my assumption was, that there must be something special which still holds this community together and shields it from extinction. The aim was to research how communication happens within this environment and how this case can support the general research in the field of ICC.

CAT promised to be the fitting theory for this kind of research, as it enables to see the accommodation process between players, clarifying the influential factors. Furthermore, the theory would allow to connect the field of ICC with game studies, to reveal the interdependence of gaming interaction and culture.

As Celia Pearce (2009) argues, a qualitative ethnographic approach is quite productive for researching game culture as it enables the researcher to observe the community from within. Furthermore, the methodology of ethnography has been favoured for research in this field (e.g. Taylor 1999, Steinkuehler & Squire 2006). An ethnographic method promised to create the best outcome for this kind of study alike, as it allows the researcher not only to observe, map, and analyse communication but also allowing to get involved to experience the influences and outcomes of interactions first-hand.

3.3. Data Collection

With the research questions in mind it was decided to base the study on the in-game chat communication of CoH. Therefore, a plan was developed to gather data in a limited timeframe. The collection was conducted in multiple game sessions between 19.2.2018-18.3.2018 [= four (4) weeks]. Therefore, multiple games were played, three (3) times a week for about two (2) hours. To get a greater variety of data, the week-days and daytimes of the collection process differed during the given time span. I observed and interacted in a) the pre-game/lobby chat communication, and b) the in-game chat communication. The data was collected in form of screenshots of the chat record and transcribed afterwards for the usage in the thesis. Furthermore, I made notes which enabled to connect in-game chat with certain in-game situations. The games on which this observation is based were chosen from or hosted in the public multiplayer-lobby of CoH. Therefore, both, the pre-game/lobby chat and in-game chat can be considered public since they are open to any player that has access to the game and joins a match. Thus, the privacy/confidentiality of in-game conversations is limited. The players which were involved in the games were not informed over the ongoing observation. Only my teammate knew about the data collection. To protect the anonymity during the subsequent analysis, process the player's game-tags and profiles are not published. Instead they will be referred to as 'Player'. The collected data and the transcriptions were saved on the private drive of my PC during the ongoing research process. After the publication of this thesis, the original data will be destroyed. I guarantee to do everything to ensure the safety and secrecy of the collected data.

A total of 44 games were played within the given timeframe and thereby I interacted with 94 different players.

3.4. Limitations of the Collection

Alongside the data collection emerged different limitations, which are worth noticing:

1. The team intern chat communication of the opponent team is not observable and could not be considered for this study. Hence, the data are limited to the described open communication and can at no point capture the whole communication of the opponent team, if conducted in privacy.
2. The collected data was gained through a conscious selection of gaming-interaction by me. Even though he tried to avoid any kind of bias it has to be clarified that the collection process happened in an environment familiar to me, and personal e.g. game-setting preferences had an undeniable impact on the selected games and hence the data.
3. All the data was collected in the open multiplayer mode of CoH, neglecting the auto-match ranked game system of the game. This choice was made due to the simple fact, that the auto-match ranked game does not support include a pre-game chat at all and player are only connected randomly by the matchmaking system without choosing the interaction with each other willingly. To gain richer data samples, I decided to probe the open combat multiplayer mode.
4. The game-interaction widely happened in two versus two games to gain a better comparability of the communication. A few data sets were also collected in three versus three player games to get a greater image if a higher player number changes the communication behaviour.

3.5. Data example

For a better understanding of what this study refers to when it describes a data-set, I decided to give an example of what such a sample would look like. Remember that the following sample is already transcribed to comply with the data safety and anonymity rules as stated under (2). As described above, all player-tags were anonymized but numbered to keep track of the amount of players I interacted with. As the study only observed conversations, cases in which players just joined a game lobby and left without chatter or were kicked without conducting any form

of verbal communication were not included. Furthermore, I refer to myself with my game-identity '*Firox*' and to my supporting teammate plain as '*teammate*'. Note also, that typing errors were transcribed without being corrected.

22.2.2018, 22:45-00:57 (CET +1)

Pre-game chat:

*Firox hosted

Firox: hi

Player #5: hi

*multiple player join and leave the game in the opponent's team

Player #5: u are team

Player #5: in my team enter just noobs

Player #5: well ...

Player #5: gl hf

Player #5: I go

Teammate: ;)

Teammate: ?

Teammate: wait

*player with bad statistics signs ready to play and gets kicked

Player #5: very hard to try found normal axis player

Player #5: just idiots and morons

Player #5: play now

Player #5: axis

Player #5: who don't know what defend

Player #5: how to stop blob

Player #5: where attack

Player #5: many idiots

Firox: u think that was better before?

*Familiar Player #1 joins the game

Firox: hi

(Familiar) Player #6: hi

Player #5: I think need go to automatch :(

*Player #5 leaves

* Firox and his teammate decided to join another game, since they already waited too long.

They joined a six-player game, playing together with a random person from the internet.

*Joining a game named “come in”

Host (Familiar) Player #7: hi

Player #8 (random teammate): hi

Player #9: hi

Host: sry [player #9] :/

Host: its not fair with u :(*due to his mediocre profile

In-game chat:

*Not so much: Firox and his teammate tried several times to force their random teammate's (Player #6) attention to certain deadly situations where he was about to lose all his units, via map pointing. Anyway, he continued to play without focus and suffered horrible losses.

Once Firox pinged a situation where one of his squads faced 3 other enemy squads in an attempt to beat them but without any chance of doing so:

Ping

Player #8 (random teammate): ? *After losing almost all his units due to his lack of attention he left and Firox's team could not make up the gap he left and lost.
--

Figure 5. Example of the data set of one game.

After each collection session, the screenshots of the chatlogs and additional notes were put together into one file. During the ongoing process, I also started to compare the samples with each other noticing the appearance of certain communication patterns in association with the players' in-game profile. It became obvious that self-presentation and the perception of the other player's in-game identity have a strong impact on the communication behaviour in multiple ways. In addition, it made a noticeable difference if I interacted with players again, as it also impacted on my own accommodation behaviour, as well as, theirs. At the end of the data collection process, after revising all the notes three major topics arose: the construction of identity, the importance of player-to-player relationships, and the influence of game-settings on identity perception and communication.

In the following chapter, I will give detailed examples of these three categories and which are the driving factors behind them. In the findings, I will explain those factors further, and show how they influence communication behaviour, the construction and perception of in-game identity, and the accommodative stance during interactions.

4. The Findings

The collected information revealed a whole variety of information concerning the research questions (see chapter 3.1.). Keeping both, the question and the theoretical background in mind a clear pattern emerged, which helped me to categorize and sort the flood of information. This

chapter is divided into four sections: Firstly, I will refer to the multiple ways in which identity is constructed and what the key influences on the decryption process are. This section will explain the influences way of a) self-presentation, b) activity-based identity, and c) the relational level of identity.

Secondly, I will explore the influence of in-game relationships on the in-game communication and interaction process. I will exemplify how factors like a shrinking community affects in-game relationships as well as the shared gaming-purpose and the shared interaction-history. These are some of the factors mainly concerning the accommodative stance between players.

In the third part this study, I will introduce how the scripts of play affect the perception of other players online. A player can be perceived e.g. negatively or as a new player by just choosing certain maps or game settings in CoH. This might affect both, the perception of a player's identity and the actual in-game communication between gamers. In this section, I will introduce the role of a) match presets, b) the availability of other games, and c) the waiting time.

The final part of this chapter will investigate some specifics of the in-game interaction. Thereby, it will be shown how s) gaming language, b) kicking or playing, and c) the available chat channels affect the communication between players.

4.1. Identity Construction

Self-Presentation

The first thing which became obvious during observation was that self-presentation not only matters online, but it is rather partially influenced by the way players chose to present themselves. Like stated in chapter one, other researchers made similar observations in MMORPGs. However, even in an RTS without any form of visual proxy there are multiple factors which may influence players identity. The actual chosen player name might tell a lot

more about the player's identity than one could imagine. The name can be seen as a conscious decision of the player to share information with the community without relying on any visual cues, such as visual or auditory context.

The foremost obvious trait which the nickname can tell about the player behind it, is its language proficiency (Category A). The name's tone can even provide clues about the geographical whereabouts of the player. A player name written in Cyrillic, Chinese or Arabic might clearly concern the language identity. Furthermore, a name might contain some affiliations to a certain country whether it is written in a particular language or not. To give an example a player might choose *Великая россия* (eng.: Great Russia) as nickname or *Panzerkampfwagen* (eng.: armored car). Even though both are written in different languages, they differ in their meaning: While *Panzerkampfwagen* gives away at least a minimal proficiency in German. It might be argued that such a name is not so significant in a game which lets players handle tanks with their original German names (e.g. Panzerkampfwagen 4). To write a name in another language with a different type of letters, takes a lot more effort. A player would not only have to come up with a meaningful name but also change the keyboard language settings of the computer to create such a nickname. Even if it cannot be told with absolute certainty, that a player with a Chinese nickname is really a Chinese player it inevitable shows some language affiliation of the affected player.

A second set of information which can be gained through observing nicknames are community affiliations or other cultural references (Category B). These might even overlap with the language phenomenon. Thus, a player might choose to come out as fan or follower of a certain TV-show or game. During the observation it became obvious that multiple players name themselves after characters of HBO's Viking TV-series *Vikings*. As such the series protagonist's name *Ragnar Lothbrok* was chosen by multiple players. Other pop-culture references are observable through comic-series related names (e.g. *Ironman*). Players might also refer to other PC, Xbox or PlayStation game-series by using related names like e.g. *Ezzio*

Auditore, who is one of the main characters from the *Assassin's Creed* franchise. It is worth noticing that referencing certain community or cultural affiliation only become understandable to a receiver which knows about its existence. A reference becomes only spottable, when the source is known to the observer. Keeping this in mind, it points towards a clear limitation of such an observation as the observer cannot possibly recognize every reference.

As a third dimension of identity information, a player can include political references in his nickname (Category C). Again, it can never be said with absolute certainty if the player shares a certain political view or affiliation in reality. Choosing a political statement as nickname or as part of it, at least indicates some connection between the political views and the identity. In a Second World War game like CoH it is not unusual to meet player with Nazi related nicknames like *SSwittmann* or *XxAdolfHitlerxX*, which might not necessarily tell if the certain player supports the Nazi ideology. They bear witness of an uncritical approach to the topic of World War II and its political dimension. Same goes for names like *IloveTrump* which might not ultimately tell whether the player is a Trump supporter, or just uses the name as caricature. In the end, both examples leave the conclusion that the player has an affiliation to a certain political topic to some degree.

The nickname may also tell something about the player's historical knowledge (Category D). As an example, it may contain the name of a historical figure, event or other historical trivia. Even if it is sometime hard separate such a reference from cultural or political ones it tells anyway about a certain experience. In a game like CoH such a historical reference often comes together with some sort of military bias. To get more concrete, a name like *BattleOfHastings*, which was a great Norman battle in medieval England might be such an example. As the game itself plays at the time of World War II, references to some involved armies or battalions are common. They might range from *101stAirborne* over *Panzerdivision-Lehr* to *RoyalEngineers*. Even historical figures like *HenryIV* or *ErwinRommel* might be used as names.

Even if the virtual name or identity might be totally made up, there are players who maybe include some information about their real identity in their online nickname (Category E). Names like *Daniel.Burns* appear to contain the player's real name. Even if it is not such a clear name, other real-life information like the birth year might be included in the name. A player name like *Justin1990*, *Jammal.Jazar1987* or other name combinations are very common amongst players. Combos with the other examples from above are also possible e.g. *ssWittmann1992*. However, it is possible that all the shared info is totally made up and have no real-life connection, but it is hard to believe that these kinds of names are developed totally out of the blue especially concerning the suffix with a modern date.

Another dimension of identity which can be shared via the nickname might be gender (Category F). In the realm of CoH it most names are either gender-neutral or male. In very rare cases they show some female gender affiliation. Thereby the name might come together or overlap with other references. For example, a nickname like *FridaKahlo* not only represents a female affiliation but can be also seen as an art reference or a relation to Mexico and the art of Kahlo. As Paik and Shi (2013) have shown, a gender swap in online communities is not unusual and thus, neither a female nickname must represent a female player nor a male nickname a male player. In the end the effect is what matters, and therefore a player with a female or male name might be perceived as a player of this gender.

Finally, the name can also tell about community affiliations (Category G). A player might choose to show a clan-membership within the name. In CoH this is usually expressed through some initials within braces. A name like e.g. *[BTK]tanker* gives away that the player is a member of the BTK clan. Before the game was embedded into Steam, those clan tags were a save indicator of a CoH-clan membership. Nowadays, as the nickname is a global one for all Steam games of the player, a clan tag must not necessarily concern CoH but could rather be the tag for another game: A gamer, playing e.g. Counter Strike in a clan and therefore decides to show the membership in his name, uses the same tag also for other games like CoH. Due to the

age of the game and the shrinking community there seem to be less clan players around than 10 years ago. A player with a clan tag is often expected to have a higher skill level than players without.

In very rare cases the player's nickname does not fall into any of the categories above, making it hard to learn anything about the player. A generic name like *Afhjw08471hf* might tell little about affiliations but still indicates the usage of the Latin alphabet and the Arabic numeral system. Another, equally important part of the player's identity is the in-game play profile. The following chapter will therefore explore the construction of the activity-based identity.

Table 1	
<i>Self-Presentation Category Examples</i>	
Category A example	Nickname <i>Beschleunigung</i> – referring to the German word for <i>acceleration</i> .
Category B example	Nickname <i>CaptainAmerica</i> – referring to the famous hero of the Marvel (comic) universe.
Category C example	Nickname <i>RonaldReagan</i> – referring to the 40th US. President.
Category D example	Nickname <i>OmahaBeach</i> – referring to the coastal battlefield, where the US forces landed on 6.6.1944.
Category E example	Nickname <i>William.Saxton1980</i> – referring to a real name and birth year.
Category F example	Nickname <i>Gamergirl</i> – referring to a female gender of the player.
Category G example	Nickname <i>[BKK]Looney</i> – referring to the player's membership in the BKK clan. (<i>Made up clan tag</i>)

Activity-Based Identity

Besides the player's nickname, one of the main identity cues is the in-game player profile. It contains a multitude of game related information and can be seen as the major influence on a) the play-interaction, and b) the communication stance. Thereby the impact of the play-statistics is so huge, that they often work like a gatekeeper when it comes to the decision whether or not to interact with a player at all. On the other hand, it enables to identify and evaluate the proficiency level of an unknown player. Like with the nickname, there are different categories which determine the personal in-game play-profile. Combined they form the activity-based identity. In the following, these identity cues will be explained and a screenshot of my in-game profile for a better understanding of the different categories can be found afterwards

The foremost important cue is the player's win-lose statistic (category 1). It keeps track of the total matches played in CoH, telling how many games were won and how many were lost. Thereby it helps to classify the other in relation to the own profile and in-game experience. Hence, this statistic also influences the power relation between players: A player with a poor win-lose ratio is normally addressed differently than a player with a good win-lose ratio. In CoH it is very common that interaction starts from checking the other players' statistics. These often determine if players seek a further interaction or leave the game/getting thrown out. Thereby it is observable, that the win-lose statistic divides the player community into three categories: 1) The unskilled players or *noobs* with a somewhat 1:2 ratio (one win for two losses), 2) the medium players with a nearly 1:1 ratio, and 3) skilled players or *pros* with a 2:1 ratio or better. Thus, the ratio might seem to be the best tool for finding a good match fitting the own play experience.

In theory newbies might identify other newbies more easily and advanced players other advanced players, so that players can interact on the same skill level. The reality looks rather different: Often enough players with advanced profiles avoid the challenge of other advanced

players and prefer playing against newbies. This practice leads to an overall problem: The reliability of the win-lose statistics. A player might have gained a formidable win-lose ratio by preferably beating newbies or weaker players. On the contrary, a player might have a bad win-lose ratio due to the fact that he/she challenged stronger opponents. This might have led to more losses, but the player might have learned more manoeuvres and his skill level might actually be higher. When it comes to the prediction of the skill level or playstyle the win-lose statistics are not significant enough on their own. Luckily, the in-game profile provides more information.

As such, the total amount of games played (category 2) add up to the picture. A player who played literally ten thousand of games can be pictured as veteran. It can be expected that a player with this amount of games played might have more experience than a player with less than hundred games. Together with the win-lose ration this gives a bigger picture of the player's identity and skill-level. There is one distortion: A player might create a second, so called smurf-account. This means that a player might create a second in-game identity which appears to be a newbie with little or no play experience covering that the player already has gathered a lot of in-game experience. The motives for such a venture might differ and today it needs to create a second Steam profile, requiring buying the game a second time. Such a behaviour is very unlikely. When Relic hosted the servers with their own online-profiles every player was able to attach up to five profiles to his online entity and smurf-accounts were a normal phenomenon. Besides the win-lose ration and the total amount of games played, there is a third dimension to the in-game statistic of each player for identifying his skill category.

The personal statistics (category 3) reveal the different game-modes a player played and reveal the detailed faction statistics is. These are equally important, to find out how much experience a player has with a certain faction. The assessment of the faction statistics work in a similar way like of the overall profile: Both, win-lose ratio and total faction games play an equally important role. From the details it is also possible to tell the player's faction and game mode preferences. How much the personal statistics matter can be shown with an example: In

one game a player with a good win-lose ratio and a couple of hundred games-played joined a match. Despite the good overall statistics, the player's teammate demanded to kick him, since he had bad statistics with the chosen faction. Therefore, it is equally important to have the fitting faction statistics. As the example showed, a player might seem to be overall experienced but might actual be inexperienced with the chosen faction. To culminate an example, a player might be an advanced player with only the *Panzer Elite* but no other faction. It can be assumed that this player is inexperienced how to play any other faction.

In the same way, the personal statistics also clarify how many skirmishes a player has made against the Artificial Intelligence (AI). This information is from certain importance because a player might have a rather good win-lose statistic by bolstering it with against the easy AI. A high number of skirmishes may always be suspicious and might reveal a player as 'comp-stomper', a player who can maybe apprehend how to fight the AI, but often performs poorly against human enemies.

Besides the faction and skirmish statistics the in-game profile also covers the ranked-game experience (category 4). If a player plays ranking games, there is a special category within the profile which shows the actual rank and comes with an own level for each playable faction. Furthermore, the rank is represented by a military rank including different visualisations which depicts actual army insignia.

Firox

American Rank

Basic Match
Lv. 1
Private First Class

British Rank

Basic Match
Lv. 1
Lance Corporal

Wehrmacht Rank

Basic Match
Lv. 1
Obergrenadier

Panzer Elite Rank

Basic Match
Lv. 1
Schütze

Personal Stats							
Level	Type	Army	Position	Wins	Losses	Streak	Disputes
?	Classic 3 VS. 3	American	Not Ranked	1	0	1	1
	Basic Match	Panzer Elite		245	106	2	31
	Basic Match	British		820	220	5	90
	Basic Match	American		44	27	-4	10
	Basic Match	Wehrmacht		364	87	5	26
	Skirmish	Panzer Elite		4	1	4	0
	Skirmish	British		3	2	-1	1
	Skirmish	American		2	1	-1	0
	Skirmish	Wehrmacht		7	0	7	0

Totals: **1490** | **444**
(1) & (2)

Dismiss

Figure 6. Firox's in-game profile with categories 1-4.

Similar to the skirmisher case, ranking game players usually differ in terms of gameplay from basic match players: They normally rely more on nerfing strategies, spamming lots of cheap units in the early game. This gameplay, suitable in a ranked game for dominating few victory points on the battle-map is often obsolete in a basic match, where players aim for total dominance. Even if they are playing the same game, they are members of two totally different groups when it comes to the gameplay.

Finally, the player's Steam profile provides additional information about the player's play-activity. Originally not part of CoH it became the meta profile when the game was implemented into Steam. With the access to the counterparts Steam profile, players may gather additional social and game related information from their counterpart. Assumed the profile is not private. For CoH (as for other games alike), the profile tells about the recent in-game activity (5) showing how many hours the player spent inside the game during the past two weeks. Furthermore, the profile also shows the total amount of hours in-game, and when a player was in-game the last time (6). Finally, the profile may also reveal some personal information (7): A profile picture, a self-description text, the home county, and the real name of the player. The personal profile also tells about past aliases used by the player.



Figure 7. Firox's Steam profile with examples 5-7. Excerpt of the profile's screenshot.

Furthermore, the Steam profile might tell about other game interests of the player. It also reveals the connection to community groups and the player's friend list. Steam is in some terms very similar to other social networks. It adds information to the overall identity of a player and possesses the possibility to connect the offline identity to the online identity. To give an example: During the data collection I encountered a player who's Steam profile revealed that

he spent almost 100 hours in two weeks inside the game. Meaning that this particular player spent more than 40 h/week in-game makes it hard to imagine that he or she was following any other activities. Such information may lead to the imagination that the player might be unemployed and that he/she does not pursue many other social activities. Such information inevitably influence the perception of the other. As this kind of statistic only covers the in-game time it does not tell about the actual play-time. There might be the possibility, that the exemplified player might just have started the game and left off to work while the PC was still running with the game on.

At the end of this section it is worth noticing again, that none of the previous reputation and in-game profile information were transferred when CoH went to the Steam servers in 2013. Players had to start off building their profile again. Furthermore, the level function for basic-games disappeared in the transit and was not again reimplemented. Players are no longer able reach a higher level playing lobby games. This also means that there is no longer the form of experience-visualisation through the military insignia for basic-game players.

The following section will introduce the relational level of identity which is strongly interconnected to the player's relations and the and the reaction to their interlocutor's identity. For this matter, the influences of self-presentation and activity-based identity have already been processed and led to an interaction. The relational level describes the interaction between players which are not total strangers anymore but also not necessarily acquaintances (yet).

The Relational Level of Identity

For the process of assessing and identifying other players and for the purpose of categorizing them, especially regarding their play-style, previous interaction become very important. Players seem to assess past interactions based on and influenced by a multitude of information. The following section will try to sort this information to enable insight into the different dimensions. Even if they may be interlinked and influenced by one another, it is possible to distinguish them from one another. Thereby, the importance of some major pattern appears. They can be

identified as the act of self-disclosure, the usability of language, the communication style quality, communication behaviour and playstyle. Together they influence the communicational power slope between players.

When players meet online for a second time they will recognize each other most likely. The more often they meet and interact with each other, the better players can remember and picture their counterpart. This becomes even more true these days, where CoH's community is shrinking. Players are more likely to meet again because there are not so many games hosted anymore like e.g. 8 years ago. Past encounters between players normally affect the way they communicate with each other. They might remember e.g. that the counterpart spoke another language than the in-game lingua franca, English. It does not have to stop there. Sharing the common goal of playing together, people might choose to chat and share information with each other while waiting for a game to begin. Thereby players might converse in an act of self-disclosure: To surpass the waiting time it is common to ask other players where they are from, which relates to an information that may directly link to a certain language. If a player for example answers that he/she is from Paris it is assumable that he or she speaks French and therefore players could continue to chat in French. The shared language aside from the English has also the power to form a relation between players. In one game I was asked by a joined player where he was from. When he revealed that he was from Germany the other player answered that this was "endlich einmal eine vernünftige Antwort" (eng.: finally, a reasonable answer). The second player immediately switched the language code and responded in a positive way. Ultimately, a language switch makes a player even more memorable. It is more likely that those players will play with each other again, assumed that the previous interaction was a positive one. If the interaction was not positive even the shared language code does not necessarily help to kit the tattered relationship.

Besides used language in previous communications another influence is the communication style. Players which tend to a more primitive or aggressive tone in their online

communication are treated different than players with a positive tone. Besides dozens of positive player interactions during the data collection there were a few very negative ones. Once I played a game with a player, who lost the game blaming his or her teammate for the negative development of the ongoing battle.

Excerpt from a match on 11.3.2018
Player #56: what a noob mate
Player #56: wp (<i>well played</i>)

Excerpt from a match on 18.3.2018
Player #59:gg
Player #59: I got a noob mate

A similar phenomenon is the influence of communication quality. As players start to chat with each other, they reveal their language skills on the chosen language. Even if English is the in-game's lingua franca it often becomes obvious, throughout the interaction that players have different mother tongues or language-abilities. These skills or the absence of them also inevitable impact the view of the interlocutor's online identity. The ability to use a certain language, especially English due to its commonness is from utmost importance. A player which cannot accommodate to any in-game spoken language is not only disadvantaged but almost outcast from the match communication. Furthermore, an absence of communication ability is seen rather negatively amongst players and may lead to an exclusion of the inapprehensible player.

Excerpt from a match on 19.2.2018

Player #1: fuf

Player #1: ara

Firox: lucky game

Player #1: пищдюк (=little boy)

Firox: ?

Communication quality is also of utmost importance: Does the interlocutor use an adequate and broad vocabulary? Does he produce a lot of errors? To what extent is the interlocutor understandable? The communication style might therefore also affect the quality. From observing the communication, it is often also easy to tell, who may be a native speaker in a certain language and who may not. Furthermore, some mistakes or misspells even have the possibility to reveal something about the speaker's mother tongue: A player mistyping the letter *ii* instead of *u* might already reveal the usage of e.g. a German or Turkish keyboard since the letter is absent in most other languages.

Excerpt from a match on 18.3.2018

Lobby chat:

Player #81: lyon?

Player #81: where gavan

Firox: green up

Player #83: glory?

Firox: yes you will gain glory

Player #81: harbor? (*It became clear that both players were obviously asking about to switching the map to gilroy's harbour, by terribly misspelling it*)

*Map switched back to gilroy's harbour

In-match chat:

Firox: gl hf

Close to the end of the match which my teammate and me were about to win the player stated the following:

Player #81: I show good rematch with mate

Player #81: go rematch

Player #81: good mate

A broad application of rude language is often seen as infantile amongst gamers (not only in CoH) and therefore so-called flaming is often dismissed as immature. Therefore, players which chose this language style, are often perceived as somewhat inferior by those parts of the community which behave appropriately. As in the example above, players which relent continuously on such a rude style, are often expelled from games where they meet a host who knows them.

Finally, it needs to be notified that the overall language used in online games follows an own grammar. CoH is no exception. There has been developed a vast vocabulary over the years which is universally valid in most gaming context, no matter what the game's theme is. As such, phrases or words have been shortened in order to enable a fast, precise communication. Classical examples would be phrases like *gg* (good game), *gl hf* (good luck, have fun), *afk* (away from [the] keyboard), or even *wth* (what the hell). Obviously, an individual must learn these phrases to use them and thus, somebody who is new to the context might not understand what *lol* (laughing out loud) means outing himself/herself as newbie or *noob*. Besides the general gaming vocabulary, CoH has its own highly contextual which is probably only accessible to an adept of the game. It could even be said that to some extent, an advanced player

needs to advance his or her language. Therefore, terms get more technical. A typical exchange of information about the tactical doctrine would go like this:

Excerpt from a match on 3.3.2018
Player #27: I m armor
Firox: go armor

For an outlander or newbie to the game communication could therefore be hard to follow. In the example above, one would need to know that player A is asking which doctrine player b is choosing, while player b is answering that he/she will play the armour doctrine. This goes even so far, that certain units or equipment have own internationally valid codes: *AC* (armored car of the Panzerelite faction), *nades* (instead of grenades), *AT* (anti-tank), *rifles* (instead of riflemen squad) *stiky* (instead of sticky bomb) etc. Even the playable factions go usually as *wehr* (for Wehrmacht), *US* (for U.S. Army), or *brits* (for the Commonwealth). The knowledge of this professional language also commits to towards the power gap between players, as somebody who does not speak the game's language is clearly disadvantaged by having clear limits to expression and understanding of tactical talk.

Therefore, the communication behaviour which players reveal during the interaction have a major impact on the relational identity. As explained above, a usage of harsh language with lots of swearing words reveals has negative effect on the swearing player's identity perception. Furthermore, advanced players distinguish themselves through the usage of professional game language from newbies. Equally important is the communication of respect for other players. It is some sort of good behaviour to communicate at the beginning of a match the phrase "*gl hf*" (=good luck, have fun). Almost more important is the recognition of a satisfying game at the end of a match by chatting "*gg*" (=good game). Thereby it does not really matter who wins and who loses, a good game can normally be recognized by both parties. This

also represents the ability of a (self-) reflective communication. Unfortunately, many observed players do not possess this trait and tend to blame others for their own mistakes. Positive and negative communication behaviours alike are usually memorized and have an impact on future interactions. A player who played several games against me continuously relied on a respectful tone, challenging me to play again in a respectful way and was therefore treated respectfully in return. Ultimately the player was memorized as a good play companion.

Excerpt from a match on 15.3.2018
Player #66: gg
Firox: gg

Finally, the (in-)ability of self-reflection also affects how seriously players take each other: a clearly weaker player, who always seeks excuses for own inabilities, is not considered as serious as a player who admits clear mistakes in the playstyle.

The playstyle works in a very similar way to the communication behaviour. Even if there are only two different options, a bad and a good playstyle it is not so easy to determine which one is which. Each player might therefore have an own understanding of good and bad. Over time there has developed a broadly recognized pattern to assess good and bad playstyle. Thereby certain play (mis-)behaviour has been recognized and almost stigmatized. To give three examples: a player which uses over proportionally artillery in the game, aiming to just kill off the opponent's base and units from long distance, reducing the actual battle-interactions to a minimum is normally referred to as an arty-noob, stuka-noob or hummel-noob (named after the faction's main artillery unit).

Excerpt from a match on 18.3.2018

Player #81: u are noobs)

Teammate: yes

Player #81: eazy win

Firox: ?

Player #81: give good mate and I show how need win

Firox: against your stukas, sure

Player #81: no

Firox: thats why I asked

Player #81: 1 – 2 stuka max

Player #81: with good mate I win u before stuka

On the opposite, a player who particularly sets on one type on one type of unit, especially by e.g. mass-producing infantry early on in the game to just overcome the opponent by a large number of units is referred to as a spammer. This behaviour is called blobbing and although it is common amongst ranked players, it has a mixed reputation amongst lobby players.

Excerpt from a match on 22.2.2018

Player #5: u are team

Player #5: in my team enter just noobs

Player #5: well ...

Player #5: gl hf

Player #5: I go

Teammate: ;)

Teammate: ?

Teammate: wait

Player #5: very hard to try found normal axid player

Player #5: just idiots and morons

Player #5: play now

Player #5: axis

Player #5: who don't know what defend

Player #5: how to stop blob

Player #5: where attack

Player #5: many idiots

Firox: u think that was better before?

As a third category can be seen glitch-users. Those kinds of players use errors within the game's perimeters, glitches, to their advantage. This behaviour is almost like cheating, using game flaws, which were not meant to be exploited to their advantage. While the first two playstyles can be learned easily and are common amongst beginners and medium players, the glitch using efforts a deeper knowledge of the game and its mechanics and is therefore more common amongst advanced and veteran players.

Ultimately, players which are recognized as members of one (or more) of the categories above, are usually perceived negatively. If they continuously rely on one of these play-stains, they might eventually be excluded from future interactions by acquaintances. It is also remarkable that players often either do not recognize themselves as associates of one category or they do but want to hide it. To take the example from above: Before one game, a player answered to the question whether he or she was an arty noob with a clear no.

Excerpt from a match on 18.3.2018

Firox: are u a stuka noob?

[...]

Player #81: no

The gameplay finally revealed the opposite. Confronted with this contrast, the player denied and eventually left the game. Finally, it has to be noticed, that a positive or negative playstyle are not necessarily linked to losing or winning. A lost game can be good and satisfactory when it comes to the play-interaction and playstyle, while a won game can also be dissatisfactory due to a bad playstyle of the opponent, causing distress rather than fun. The latter will usually affect lower the chance of a future game formation with the particular bad player.

Another major phenomenon which can easily be observed is the power slope between players. Partially based on the activity-based identity, the more advanced players are usually empowered over the less advanced players. A player with a better statistic usually possesses more power during a communication than a player with a bad statistic.

Excerpt from a match on 25.2.2018

Firox: hi

Player #17: NAAAAAAAAAAJS

Firox: ?

Teammate: hi

Player #17: U seem to be good player

Player #17: w8 sec

Player #17: pls

Player #17: [Player #18] had crush

Player #17: he need to reconnect

Firox: ?

Player #17: kick him

Therefore, better players usually expect to get treated differently: In a team-based game, it is very common that the better player demands to pick the fellow team mate. If a joined player is not to his liking it is usually demanded to kick him or her. The most powerful player in a game is always the host since he/she has the control over the game settings and also functions as gatekeeper.

Excerpt from a match on 18.3.2018

Firox: hi

Player #81: kik

Player #81: u want good stat or good game?

Player #84: hi

Firox: I didnt see anything outstanding in your portfolio...

Player #81: for good stat u can play vs kids and girls

Player #81: kick 3 (*Player #84*)

Player #84: ^^

Firox: well

Player #81: ?

Player #81: u scary

Player #81: or what

Besides the statistic-based power, there is the play-based power. Which directly connects to the importance of previous interactions: If player A lost in previous the play-interaction(s) or performed rather poorly against player B, it will inevitable effect the power

slope between the two players. Therefore, layer B will have more communicational power than player A. This makes a disrespectful behaviour of player A towards player B more unlikely, if he chooses to stay within a certain code of conduct. Both phenomena affect the communication between players and determine to certain degree how to behave during conversation.

Players, who continually interact in a positive or at least satisfactory with each other might eventually intensify their relationship with each other. They might end up as online-friends. CoH has the possibility to add a player as a friend. The observation of this study thereby revealed, that a relationship also alters the way players interact with each other. Furthermore, sustaining a broad group of friends helps to enables a faster formation of games. As CoH's community is shrinking, the ability to invite friends directly into a game reduces the waiting time and the risk to meet bad unknown, eventually bad behaving players.

Observing how identity is constructed in an RTS like CoH, it seems that it is strongly tied to group affiliations of the players. The challenge lies in the process of decoding the identity of the other. The data indicate that player's identity mostly relies on self-presentation and self-disclosure. Interest, affiliations, values and proficiency may be shared during the interaction between players. This seem to happen in multiple ways. In an impersonal, nonvisual environment like CoH personal information like language, cultural belonging or interests might be expressed through the in-game name. This information let the players also draw conclusions about their interlocutor's offline self as they must not necessarily concern the game's environment. It seems that making oneself a name becomes much more real online than offline, as it adds new dimensions to self-expression.

The play-based dimension of each player's online identity on the contrary, is tied closely to the game context. It is like a professional ID-card telling in absolute numbers about the professional in-game history of a player. It leaves not much room for interpretations and it seems that players assess each other with help of this statistical and anonymous dimension most of the time.

The way players play the game, the way they communicate and interact with each other connects the professional and personal dimension of the identity. How they express themselves through chatter and gameplay seem to be important influences on players' accommodative stance. This form of interaction is the most tangible and corresponds the most recent research in the field of CAT.

4.2. Player-To-Player Relationships

Making friends in times of declining player numbers is one way to keep in contact with other players from previous, satisfactory game-interactions. Making virtual friends can also add towards the common game experience in multiple ways, such as reduced waiting times, shared memory, a common goal. They sum up identity traits of the other and continue to complete the picture of a certain interlocutor as relationship means a continuous interaction with a certain person. Furthermore, relationships inevitably influence the communication stance between players as the following chapter will show.

In times of declining player numbers in the CoH community a large friend base possesses the possibility to see who is online and to stay in contact with formerly strangers. Even if those relationships are not necessarily on a personal level they enable players to find each other, to connect, and play again. This has as positive side effect as it reduces the waiting time_in the pre-game lobbies. During the data collection phase, some players were added as friends and repeatedly sought play interaction with me. Players can act and interact with friends via an integrated interface in Steam and the game itself. If their counterpart accepts the friend request, the players can join each other's games via the very same interface. Furthermore, lobby games in which friends are waiting are marked in-game with a smiley. Steam itself also notifies when friends are starting the game so that one can e.g. chose to follow them or start the game when many friends are online.

Steam friends eventually become the preferable playmates since they already share a common interaction-history. The fact that they know each other, the other's match setting preferences, strategies, favourite factions and playstyle supports the in-game relationship. It is much more convenient and probably less frustrating playing with or against familiar players. Those players are more likely to respect each other and willing communicate. As players usually add those friends they shared a satisfying game interaction with, it leads to the conclusion that relationships also enhance the overall game experience and fun factor. I also prefer to play with online friends as they are more reliable sparring partners than unknown players. It was also observed that other players tend to the same behaviour as some always joined games in pairs or pairs of players were sighted in the same games. The perception of the befriended other is refined continuously over time, either ending up in some sort of real felt relationship between players or a break up.

As playing the game is the shared goal of all players, getting fast into a good game can be seen as the shared aim of all communicational interaction. Collecting a possibly large friend base of potential players brings one closer to this target. Again, even if friends do not get closer on a personal level, they might be considered as relationships with a common goal. In the game environment with more unfitting than fitting playmates, these relationships help to spend less time waiting and more time playing.

Befriended players who know each other for a while also tend to adjust their gameplay on each other for a steeper contest: When a friend preferably used infantry-based tactics in the past, it is possible to anticipate and counter such a move in the next game. By doing so, the counterpart will eventually be forced to adjust the gameplay in future matches to stay competitive. Even if their skill level might be different, players who play continuously with each other may form a deeper bond and learn from each other, if they are willing to do so. It is also more possible and more likely that friends share feedback with each other to improve the

gameplay and behaviour. Thus, friends are more open to answer positively on each other wishes by choosing a preferred map or certain game settings.

Excerpt from a match on 11.3.2018

Player #60: hey

Teammate: hi

Player #60: I've got a friend

Finally, it becomes obvious that relationships have a large effect on the communicational stance between players. A shared past with foremost positive game experiences lets players respond more positively to each other. Steam friends thereby outrival unknown online playmates. To give an example: In one game, an opponent demanded a friend to be kicked. Due to the shared relationship, I felt obligated to defend the friend:

Excerpt from a match on 18.3.2018

*Steamfriend #6 joins

Firox: bonjour

Steamfriend #6: hi

Teammate: hi

Teammate: gut genug? [*Eng.: good enough?*]

Player #81: 29-29 its so good mate

Player #81: kik

Firox: to be honest, he plays better than you

Steamfriend #6: lol

Firox: from what I have seen

Firox: I played with him already couple of games

Teammate: lets go

Firox: so you can play, or leave

Firox: your call

Player #81: lol

Player #81: u want good stat?)

Firox: but mon ami [Steamfriend #6] stayws

Player #81: play with cpu

Steamfriend #6: thx mate

*Player #81 leaves

*(Familiar) Player #85 joins

Firox: c'etais très grand idiot [*Eng.: This was a big idiot*]

Steamfriend #6: hi mate

Steamfriend #6: carrément [*Eng.: Totally*]

Firox: ;)

Friends are also more likely to respond to chat messages of each other and usually use a more respectful language style. They might even switch between languages to accommodate towards each other.

It can be said, that Steam-friendship matters and matters not at the same time. In CoH they are only a mere shadow of offline relationships, as they rarely serve more than the shared interest of getting into satisfying games faster. Nevertheless, friends tend to accommodative acts to keep the relationships alive, as long as the interactions are rated satisfactory.

The findings indicate that player-to-player relationships are foremost partnerships of convenience. Players build online relationships with the goal of playing. Within those

communities of practice players demonstrate a higher willingness to accommodate. It seems that players try to make their online friends feel convenient by e.g. switching to their mother tongue. Such accommodation seems to be more likely between friends than between strangers.

The process of relationship build is a continuous one, as players continuously learn more about each other as they share information. For the nature of game interaction, the playstyle, certain skills and communication characteristics seem to be the most interesting factors within game-relationships. Other factors like nationality, offline interests or cultural affiliations seem to be of lower interest. The data shows that in-game relationships are much superficial as the real personality of online friends stays hidden behind the professional gaming personality. Interacting with online friends is mostly limited to game interactions. Even though it is possible to approach friends via the Steam chat, it is not very common or happens to convince them to start the game. Regarding CAT, it seems that player-to-player relationships have the power to bridge the gaps between members of different groups, as they neglect differences in language, playstyle, skill level or even nationality or culture. The driving factor seem to be a stable relationship with the aim of sharing a satisfying game interaction.

The next chapter will introduce the scripts of play-interactions in CoH and their impact on interaction and the perception of the interlocutors in-game identity.

4.3. Scripts of Play-Interaction in CoH

Besides the realms of Identity and Relationships there is a third dimension which starts to matter as players become more familiar with the game itself, the scripts of play. Certain in-game match presets influence the perception of the other and may help to determine other player's skill level or style of play, without even checking the personal profile like explained in chapter 4.1.

Most of the information which are derived from the scripts of play become only perceivable for player's which are already familiar to some extent to the game, the community and its general code of conduct. Furthermore, it is important to notice that only the host of a

match has ability to influence the presets. That does not of course mean that the scripts, beside the game's name are not negotiable, but ultimately only the host player has the power to change. This also means, that foremost the host player communicates certain identity cues via the scripts of play but by joining the game and accepting those rules, other players align with the host (and his or her identity). Finally, even though there is the possibility to choose from winning conditions between annihilation and victory points. For this study only, the dimensions of annihilation matches were observed and led therefore led to the exclusion of the games with other victory conditions.

The following chapter will show which impacts certain match presets such as the name of the game, the chosen map, the atmosphere, the starting positions, and the resource settings. For a demonstration of how categories a) to d) look in-game, see figure 8.

The Name of the Game (a)

The game name might particularly influence the choice to join a match right away. The name can be chosen welcoming to all kinds of players (e.g. 'gg' or 'come in') or might be group specific (e.g. 'noobs only' or 'only pros'). The name might also follow similar patterns of the player name (see chapter 4.1.) as it normally reveals some identity information about the host player. The name also contains information about target audience, as a match might call for certain skill levels or even nationalities (e.g. 'French host'). Due to several influences like e.g. available other games, available player types online and foremost waiting times, the host eventually decides to be less strict with the interpretation of his demands. Especially long waiting time nowadays normally call for an adjustment of expectations and a certain flexibility of the chosen scripts. The game-name cannot be so easily adjusted without closing a match and re open it with a new name. Therefore, the name game name often does not solely matter on its own and it is inevitable to check the joint players, e.g. to estimate whether a game is still for advanced players only or not.

The Chosen Map (b)

A second script which matters is the chosen battle map. Presumably every player has its preferred map, its layout often affects the gameplay or playstyle and therefore might already tell something about the joined players. Some maps push for a balanced gameplay while others call for a spamming, or a defensive, artillery-based gameplay. Therefore, the chosen maps normally give hints on the players' skill levels and play-style preferences. Especially when players are observed playing the same maps, with the same play-style repeatedly. During the observation, there were cases in which players were repeatedly sighted on the same maps, with the same presets, playing the same style. Such a behaviour often comes together with an inability to adjust on another map or other presets.

Excerpt from a match on 27.2.2018

Firox: hi

Teammate: hi

Player #23: hi

Player #23: wanna play Achelous? (*a different map*)

Player #23: I hate lyon (*the current map*)

Firox: **** no (*"hell" got censored by the chat*)

The map preferences therefore add up to the profile of an unknown player together with the personal statistics and maybe repeated behaviour patterns.

The third script of importance is the so-called atmosphere. This is the game's term for different weather or day-time options on the game maps. More performance intensive and distracting weather conditions like rain are widely rejected by the player community and have almost no effect on the game-mechanics. Therefore, games where rainy conditions are preset are perceived negatively by other players as they are normally subject to negotiations. They

most likely also affect the perception of the host, as it is unlikely that advanced players which are familiar with the community's preferences would set e.g. rainy conditions as it is just bothering most of the players. It can be assumed that mostly inexperienced players would set such conditions on purpose.

Starting Positions (c)

Same goes for the starting positions. Even though each map contains fixed starting positions for each team, there is the possibility to choose from three different position presets: a) flip the fixed team's starting positions, b) set up random starting positions leaving the individual positions and the teams position up to chance, and c) setting fixed positions so that every player will know beforehand where themselves, their teammates, and opponents start the game. The most common way to play is with option c) which has developed to be the common position preset. That is because some maps have slight advantages/disadvantages for either of the factions according to the starting position. Furthermore, to know the starting position already provides the possibility to develop a basic strategy before the game. Therefore, changing the preset fixed positions or leaving them to chance, is often perceived negatively and is often demanded to be changed by other players. It even goes so far that on some maps flipping the starting positions equals to willingly choose a disadvantage. Therefore it is generally considered foolish by experienced players, leaving a bad mark on the host and fellow players which accept such conditions.

Resources (d)

Finally, the resource settings are the last scripts which can be seen influential to the host and group identity. The game comes with two possibilities for the resource settings a) many resources, and b) standard resources. Option a) is the more common preset since it enables an accelerated unit production, resulting in a faster, big-battle interaction. Furthermore, it provides a greater equality between the factions independent of the chosen map. Option b) is more uncommon as it supports a slower gameplay focussed on less units in the beginning of a

match. Normal resources may also advantage or disadvantages certain factions on certain maps. Those presets are often chosen by individual players or experienced teams to ‘stage’ the game conditions for a certain gameplay strategy often relying on meeting the perfect resource and map presets. Therefore, a deviation from option a) often leads to the perception that the host (and possible teammates) are advanced players which know what they are doing. Such a perception is often supported by a ‘good’ profile (see chapter 4.1. b). If the player’s statistics are bad it is more likely that the host is a newcomer or not so familiar to the game and its characteristics.



Figure 8. Screenshot of the game lobby with the settings categories (a) to (d).

Summing up this section, it has become obvious, that even some seemingly trivial information like the chosen map or other chosen settings have important meaning. Thereby, they are committing toward the picture of the (un-)known other. In a computer mediated game environment like CoH most information can tell something about fellow players and their identity. These factors impact the interaction and accommodative stance between players in a unique way as the interaction is a highly selective process. A new dimension for CAT is that

players build their own environment as they chose the scripts of their play interactions themselves. The findings indicate, that chosen presets must be seen as part of the player's identity as they represent play preferences. The settings also allow accurate predictions about the other's skill-level and playstyle even before entering any sort of interaction. They can rather function as gatekeepers, impacting the choice whether to get involved in a game with certain presets at all.

Over the years a certain the community of CoH developed certain playstyles for certain maps under certain conditions. Experience and personal progress strongly the perception of certain scripts. The settings are intertwined with the individual expectations on a satisfying game interaction. On the other hand, experience might also create prejudice as players suspect certain presets to cause a certain gameplay, leading to fast judgement based on previous experiences e.g. on a certain map. The presets can maybe be seen as communication partner themselves as they transport information in close touch to the players which comply with them.

In the following chapter this paper will comes back to the initial research questions and the conclusion, how far CAT is applicable in the gaming context and what (new) insights can be gained from a study like this.

5. Conclusion

This study was driven by the interest to explore a new application field for CAT and to find out how far the research field of ICC can reach out. Thereby, this paper explored the boundaries and connections between game studies and ICC concerning the communication behaviour of a multinational and multicultural community of players. It is worth remembering that this final version of the paper is the outcome of almost half a year's work and that it's a streamlined version which does not contain all nuances of what was discovered during the study. This paper

had to be narrowed down to answer the initial research questions. The most two important findings were: First, culture is in everything even or especially in games like CoH. It is formed, lived and shared by an international community of people. This supports the viewpoint of Edward T. Hall (1970) that all aspects of culture are tied to communication. As this study has demonstrated, even information like available resource or ambient settings that may seem trivial on the first look have a potential impact on player interaction. By experiencing the game further and learning about the community its rules, preferences and behaviour codex, it becomes clear that even game-settings may 'talk'. This discovery led to the second finding, that it is possible to successfully apply CAT in the context of computer mediated communication or game studies. As it will be revealed in this chapter, not all aspects of the theory are applicable in the same way as some weight more, some weight less and some may be absent or transformed.

5.1. CAT and Gaming Culture

CAT is an intergroup theory which has been used in various contexts over the past years to explore communication between two groups like patients and practitioners (Osta, Barnes, Pessagno, Schwartz & Hirshfield, 2017), law enforcers and civilians (Giles, Linz, Bonilla & Gomez, 2012, and Barker et al, 2008), or the communicational challenges within a multiracial community (Mahadhir, Mohd Nor & Azman, 2014). Like chapter 1.3. introduced, CAT has rarely been used in CMC context and not in a gaming communication context at all.

This void is now filled by this very paper showing that CAT can also be used to explore in-game communication between individual players and groups of players. Which parts of the theory emerge from the data will be exemplified in the following.

Accommodation in-Game. Accommodational behaviour or strategies are evident in most of the communicational interactions in game. Remember that almost every action may be interpreted as a message, whether it was intended or unintended. Comparable to the findings of Riordan, Markman and Steward 2013) it is evident that the relation between players have a major influence on their accommodation behaviour as it impacts the

communicational convergence. The communication behaviour towards stranger is different than towards friends. Chatting in a certain way, using certain language or a language style may cause accommodation (or counteraccommodation) in the same way that the style of gameplay does. The bottom line is that a certain communication style always creates a reaction by the interlocutors. Whether it is a host switching to certain easy map when advanced players joined the game, or players revealing themselves as ranked players by using certain infantry-spam tactics. Player actions will most likely trigger a reaction which can be explained with the help of CAT. In the first example it would most likely be a counter- or overaccommodative stance by the more advanced players, talking the less experienced player into changing the map or leaving the game in an act of nonaccommodation. In the second example the players would try their best to accommodate their game strategies accordingly to face the shown gameplay.

Another form of accommodation would be to choose a certain game-interaction with other players. As the findings indicate, the reason for the formation of a game can be various. Players can choose their interactors based on their in-game identity: self-presentation, activity-based identity or a relational level. Again, the relationships between players also impact the accommodative stance based on previous interactions. Finally, the scripts of play have an influence which is not to underestimate. Players might only enter a game interaction on their favourite maps or their preferred settings or make negotiate for adjustments. Negotiating changes with a game's host may inevitably affect the accommodation between players even if adjustments are not approved. A positive attitude towards fellow players might even support a positive interaction perception. Similarities were found by Gasiorek and Giles (2015), as inferred positive motives might have a positive effect on experiencing nonaccommodation.

Immediate Context. CAT claims that there always must be an immediate context which makes accommodation necessary. As CoH is the large context in which the interaction between players happen, the pre-game lobby, in-game chat or the battlefield would be the

environment in which the communication happens. Thereby, players obviously must continuously negotiate the interaction between themselves and their fellow gamers. This may concern certain scripts of play like resource or ambient settings, the chosen starting positions, the language of interaction, or the applied in-game play-tactics or even the gameplay (e.g. factions to be chosen). Thereby it seems that an outcome oriented, occasionally harsh language style is more common amongst strangers than amongst familiar players. This might link to the observations of Fullwood, Orchard and Floyd (2013) which found that people in chat rooms without a personal profile picture may tend to lean more towards a risky communication behaviour as they are less identifiable.

Overall the gaming portal Steam must also to be considered: not only is it providing the game infrastructure, but it is also the platform where players keep track of their friends when they are not in-game. Players who are at their PC might be influenced to start playing by e.g. getting notified that one of their friends starts CoH. They are also be able to get into a communication via Steam's own chat tool. Ultimately Steam has also the power to influence the decision to start playing: If many CoH playing friends are in-game it might affect the decision to start playing as it might shorten the estimated waiting time to get into play.

Approximation Strategies. As shown in chapter 4.2. relationships may play a major role and therefore impact strongly the communication accommodation between players. The data has shown that players switch the language code to accommodate to each other. Whether it is through using their mother tongue, the language of the interlocutor or, most commonly a shared third language like English to communicate with each other. Same goes for the technical language used during communication: The data showed that game-related technical language or gaming language is used if possible, assumed that the interlocutor can understand it. Therefore, unfamiliar interlocutors have to constantly negotiate and explore the limits of the used language. The findings suggest, that e.g. an advanced player must reduce the technical language to a minimum when talking to a newbie or at least explain certain terms

first. If there is a certain relational level reached between players, players become more open and willing to accommodate by successfully using sociolinguistic strategies to satisfy each other's communicational needs. Like Muir, Joinson, Cotterill and Dewdney (2017) the outcome of this study supports the view that even in a CMC environment a power slope between interlocutors exists. This slope significantly affects the interpersonal impression and shapes the linguistic accommodation: A newcomer to the game might not be able comprehend game related technical language in the same way as an advanced player does and therefore might experience the conversation and the communication partner and game experience more negatively.

Interpretability Strategy. Like Gallois and Giles (2015) pointed out, this conversation strategy is used widely in an educational context with newcomers. The collected data also indicates that in a game context there is a similar trend. For instance, if a player hosts a game with swapped positions he or she is instantly recognized as a newcomer to the game by more experienced players. As pointed out earlier, many game maps were designed in a way that puts factions in certain advantages or disadvantages depending on their starting position. This fact must be learned through experience or through explanation by more experienced players. Same goes again for the technical vocabulary. As mentioned above a more accommodative stance towards newcomers is inevitable since technical or shortened game related terms might not be understood. To maintain a successful communication, it might be necessary to avoid certain terms or explaining them.

Interpersonal Control Strategies. Another dimension which is covered by CAT and the collected data are the interpersonal control strategies used during a conversation between two people on different power levels. There is a difference in the nature of such a power slope in online and offline communication. While offline it can be caused by many things, such as political power, age or the job (remember the example of a boss and his driver). In a faceless computer mediated environment, the distinguishing factor seems to be strongly activity-based

experience. As shown earlier, the personal player statistics as part of the in-game identity have a major impact on how players in CoH communicate with each other. This activity-based identity thereby influences to recognize each other either as a noob, a medium player, or as an advanced 'pro' player. The relational level of identity also helps to refine this initial statistic-based categorization, ultimately leading to a more individual recognition of the other e.g. based on the remembrance of a certain gameplay. Thereby, it might be possible to accommodate communication to a medium player, by recognizing and remembering individual skills or play-styles. The process normally goes from playing with a random medium player, towards remembering and recognizing the player who likes to rush over the infantry bridge on Gilroy's harbour.

The more experienced a player gets, the more the gameplay might differ from other players by showing an individual nuance of gameplay. Nevertheless, the 'pros' also show off that they have already mastered the basic principle of the game, the behaviour within its community, and the communication codes. Like Mark Chen (2012) pointed out, a gaming community is always a community of practice for common actions and behaviours. The pro players have already mastered their playful way through trying, revising and failing, by retrying various strategies to achieve an 'elite' status. Even if Chen conducted his research in the environment of the MMORPG World of Warcraft, his conclusion seems to be also valid in games of the RTS genre like CoH: Expertise is defined through player practice and relationships between players (Chen, 2012, p. 168). The players explore the rules and constraint systems motivated by a drive to get better and have a fun time within the imagined reality.

Discourse Management strategies. Even though discourse management strategies are a vital part of CAT's sociolinguistic strategies, they are almost absent in CoH. The pre-game chat is like 'the wild-west' as interlocutors just shout out what's on their mind when it suits them. The only fragment which might come close to a discourse management is when the host greets joining players or asks if everybody is ready to start the match. Since players are not

obligated to answer any questions (and often do not do it) it is rather impossible to manage a discourse. Another example of some sort of management could be a host kicking a misbehaving player after e.g. using abusive language towards other players. During in-game chatter, the exchange of certain tactics or the chosen doctrine happens in some games and players are expected to commit information in this phase accordingly. Often there is not any constructive communicational commitment at all. This shows that there is only a rudimentary discourse management in CoH.

CAT's Component	Appearance in the Study's Context
Accommodation Behaviour	✓
Immediate Context	✓
Approximation Strategies	✓
Interpretability Strategies	✓
Interpersonal Control Strategies	✓
Discourse Management Strategies	✗

After getting some examples of how CAT is applicable in the context of an online RTS gaming community, it is time to turn back to the initial research questions to see how they may be answered.

5.2. Answering the Research Questions

In the following, we are coming back to the research questions to see how they can be answered with the help of this study's findings.

How do players accommodate to each other during a computer-mediated interaction in an RTS?

The answer to this question appears rather simple: Players communicate with each other through direct chatter, through gameplay or through their displayed identity and the chosen scripts of play. Almost every shared information can be interpreted as communication effort: It ranges from the player's nickname over the chosen map, the used language and style, to the displayed gameplay. Everything communicates information between the players making an accommodation effort almost unavoidable.

The findings also revealed that relationships between players have a lasting effect on the accommodative stance: They increase the possibility of a friendly and satisfactory interaction and may also determine the used language.

Finally, also the competitive gameplay of an RTS makes adaptation inevitable. As players try to overthrow their opponents they constantly have react on their enemy's selection of units, the enemy's commands and their way of gameplay. Same goes for potential teammates: If co-players are unable to coordinate their play efforts, they will most likely fail.

How is communication adjusted by the structural-framework of the game-environment?

As the direct channel for chatter is mainly provided by the in-game chat or the interpersonal Steam chat, the possibilities for communication are limited. There is no way to exchange e.g. visual messages or gestures, taunts or mimics. Before the match extended chatter between the players is possible but rarely exceeds basic messages like greetings. In-game it seems that the nature of the fast, tactical gameplay of an RTS limits the exchange of messages to a minimum. Furthermore, most information is reduced to acronyms (e.g. *gg*) or technical terms (e.g. *go rifle*).

As already mentioned, there are other ways to share information with interlocutors like a certain self-presentation or gameplay. It seems that players' gameplay statistics can be seen as one of the most influential impacts to decide whether or not to interact with each other.

Players in CoH tend to prefer playing against players on the same or a lower proficiency level. This means that the game's implemented statistical system strongly impacts player-to-player interactions as they move between the skill groups as they play the game. This also affects the perception of players as they can be perceived as sportsmanlike, playing against players on their own level, as ambitious, playing against players on a higher level or cowardly, playing against player on lower skill levels.

How do players construct an in-game identity in CoH?

The absence of an avatar or visual in-game proxy shifts the importance of visual cues towards other identity cues like the chosen nickname, the activity-based identity. Therefore, the personal game identity is also interconnected to the player's offline identity as displayed, non-game related information within the nickname might show. The in-game identity strongly relies on the activity-based identity as it determines the player's success in the game. It also gives away if the player is a newbie, an advanced player or can be considered as a veteran.

The relational level of identity as well as the relationships of a player also add up to the in-game identity. It may even happen that a player is recognized and remembered by other players due to his unique play-style. Especially in a game like CoH with a shrinking community it is easier to identify and remember certain players as there are not so many around anymore.

The personal Steam profile on the other hand goes even beyond the CoH identity as it completes the picture of the player. It may not only provide additional information like playtime, the home country or real name, but also which games are played besides CoH.

How do players cope with the absence of visual/physical cues in an RTS?

As mentioned before the importance or value of visual cues are simply transferred into other cues like the nickname, the personal statistic or the gameplay.

5.3. Repercussions for CAT

First of all, this study indicates that CAT is applicable in a CMC environment with a game community-based background. Even if further research on this topic may be advised this study has revealed several repercussions for the CAT itself.

This study has verified that even in this rather new context, personal identity matters and can even be expressed in multiple ways, like the personal nickname, the game name or even game settings.

Even though the game environment of the RTS genre in case of CoH does not support the visualisation of cues, the study points out that the importance of visual cues is transferred to other nonverbal cues like the chosen nickname, gameplay, or in-game profile.

Furthermore, the significance of the communication environment itself should be reconsidered as it is full of meaning. Especially the scripts of play interaction like game settings or the chosen battle map give away meaningful information. Scholars and especially game-designers should be more aware of this fact in the future. The study exemplifies that communication not only happens in the implemented and designated chat channels but also elsewhere in a metasphere.

The meaning of relationships must also be re-evaluated as they seem to be much more outcome oriented in the gaming context: players preferably of the same skill group (e.g. expert players) befriend each other to get into play faster. This means, the bigger a player's community the higher the chance of getting into a satisfactory game. This suggests that in-game relationships are often rather partnerships of convenience than real friendships.

Another interesting finding is that the personal power is strongly connected to the activity-based experience. Experienced players with good statistics are considered more powerful than newcomers to the game. Conversations are often affected accordingly leaving the more experienced player with a higher communicational power. As the personal skill level

progresses, players are able switch activity-based groups from newbies towards veterans, gaining a higher standing within the community.

Finally, this study indicates that the importance of the personal offline identity and the personal cultural background are stepping back behind the in-game identity and game-play culture. Artefacts of the offline identity are still observable and influential as they determine e.g. the chosen nickname, the spoken language, or the Steam profile.

In the end, this study suggests that a rather new environment like game-based CMC is an interesting and complex application area fitting to develop CAT even further in the future.

6. Evaluation of this Study and Future Research Prospects

Before coming to the future research prospects, I would like to take a critical look on how this study turned out in the end.

Evaluation of this Study

As the initial research questions could be answered I would rate the methodological approach to the research subject positively. The study also indicates that CAT is successfully applicable in the context of game CMC and provides new accents to the research in the field of intercultural communication. Choosing ethnography therefore paid off as this method helps with exploration of the ludisphere (Pearce, 2009), making it accessible for qualitative research.

On the other hand, I cannot deny that there have also been unexpected obstacles during the conduct of this study. When I chose to observe in-game communication I expected that the analysis would feed much more on the exchange of words. In the end the analysis turned out to be much more on patterns in the participants communication behaviour, appearance and self-presentation rather than chatter. In retrospect it is also surprising how dependant I was from the

participants and their display of communication. There have been many situations during this study, where the participating players did not interact with me at all by remaining silent. Even if such a behaviour gives room for interpretation, it was not from high value for this particular study and its research questions.

As a long time player of CoH, my experience of community and in-game communication behaviour exceeded the boundaries of this study. My expectations of utilizable data therefore exceeded the actual quality and quantity of the collected ones. I therefore faced the challenge of fading out many of those experiences for the sake of a provable and ethical scientific work. This has turned out as downside of the ethnographic approach and observing while being part of the environment.

Another challenge was the process of decoding and understanding identity in the context of online gaming, as it is uncertain if any displayed information in the anonymous online world can be linked in any way to the offline identity of participants. As Jacobson (2010) pointed out, we have no choice but to treat pseudonymous online characters like real human subjects whose identities are explorable.

Setting the limitations to the study was yet another difficult task. I agree with Taylor Bogdan and DeVault (2015) that it is challenging to set clear boundaries for such a research subject as there are always more and more interesting topics to concentrate on during research. As mentioned before, during the research process many discoveries had to be filtered out as they were not fitting into the limitations of this study. These can be however subject of future research.

When it comes to the reliability of the chosen ethnographic approach, I would assess it as the most fruitful method for the research in online gaming communities. Especially after knowing a community for so long, I approve Monrtensen's (2018) claim that the meaning of many aspects only become visible and understandable from the perspective of a participant. It is however also true when Thomas (2010) describes that it is often challenging to leave the field

work and reflect on the observed data and its meaning with the required objectivity and distance. On the other hand, Thomas (ibid.) also suggests that ethnography is always bound to the researcher's perspective. The key point, I also struggled with, is to be wary not to take any community's or game's internal processes for granted. All terms and behavioural patterns must be explained, as an outsider does not understand them the same way an insider does.

When it comes to judging the reliability of certain method or questions, Lincoln (2010) rightfully states that all research is adding up to the scientific dialogue. He claims that this dialogue is about judgement, trust and certainty of research, even if life is more about ambiguity. To give a final evaluation of qualitative research, it can be noted that "qualitative research is a craft that can only be learned and appreciated through experience. It requires skills and a devotion that must be developed and nurtured in the real world." (Taylor, S. J., Bogdan, R., & DeVault, M., 2015, p. 335) This counts for the virtual world as well.

Future Research Prospects

As for future research in this sector it could be interesting to examine if the findings of this study can be reproduced in a similar environment. It would be worth applying the parameters of this study on other game types or genres like e.g. shooter, mobile games or sport games to determine if the outcome is similar.

After conducting this study, I would advise a couple of changes: First of all, it would be interesting to see other player's perception of the communication behaviour. Therefore, it would be necessary to interview other CoH players, exploring how they would see their own accommodation efforts and identity construction process. It would also be a possibility to reduce the subjective influence on observation by e.g. only watching others play instead of getting self-involved. This might also open the possibility to alter the focus from pre-game and in-game chatter towards a play-based viewpoint without getting too much distracted or biased by own gameplay performances.

A further possibility would be to simply use CAT in another RTS. It is imaginable that a different game background (not World War II again!) and a different framework may not only impact the identity construction but also the communication behaviour.

Overall this study only scratched on the surface of what might be conceivable through the application of CAT in the context of online gaming communities. It might also be useful to concentrate to conduct a more in depth-study, concentrating on certain aspects of the CAT rather than the general applicability.

Altering the methodologic approach might also come up with new insights into the communication accommodation process within gaming communities. As this study mostly relies on my personal, ethnographic observations it might be interesting to hear the voice of other players, too. As mentioned earlier, by conducting interviews with player groups it would be possible to gain a deeper insight into self-perception, the self-presentation process and the perception of others.

Adding a quantitative level could help to decode the community by e.g. determine how many players of each type (newcomer, medium, pro) are within the community and how their communication behaviours differs from each other. It might even be possible to collect information about the national and cultural backgrounds of the players to determine how accommodative behaviour differs from county to country or culture to culture within the context of online gaming.

Finally, future research in the sector of game communication might highlight the relevance of this subject to the field of Intercultural Communication and animate more scholars to reflect and examine on various aspects of contemporary culture.

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