

**Performing identity online:**  
Gamer identity, gender and ideological discourse

Master's thesis  
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English  
December 2019

## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

<b>Tiedekunta - Faculty</b> Humanistinen tiedekunta	<b>Laitos - Department</b> Kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitos
<b>Tekijä - Author</b> Niko Rissanen	
<b>Työn nimi - Title</b> Performing identity online: Gamer identity, gender and ideological discourse	
<b>Oppiaine - Subject</b> Englanti	<b>Työn laji - Level</b> Pro gradu -tutkielma
<b>Aika - Month and year</b> Joulukuu 2019	<b>Sivumäärä - Number of pages</b> 66
<b>Tiivistelmä - Abstract</b>	
<p>Tämän tutkielman tarkoitus on tutkia identiteetin rakentamista vuorovaikutuksessa videopeliihmisellä keskustelufoorumilla käyttäen työkaluna tietokonevälitteistä diskurssianalyysia. Analyysi keskittyy erityisesti pelaajaidentiteetin luomiseen ja rakentamiseen. Tutkielma ottaa myös kantaa pelaajaidentiteetin sukupuolittumiseen, joka on historiallisesti ollut vahvasti hegemonisen maskuliinista. Analyysissa tarkastellaan kriittisen diskurssianalyysin näkökulmasta, miten omaa pelaajaidentiteettiä legitimoidaan foorumikeskusteluissa.</p> <p>Vuorovaikutusta tarkastellaan kielen tasolla käyttäen monipuolisesti eri diskurssianalyysin menetelmiä hyväksi. Tärkeimpänä keinona on tutkia vastakkainasettelua negatiivisen toisen ja positiivisen itsen representaatiolla.</p> <p>Identiteettiä käsitteenä tarkastellaan hyödyntäen sekä sosiaalisen identiteetin teoriaa että erinäisiä sosiolingvistisiä identiteetin tulkintatapoja diskurssissa. Tutkimus käsittelee identiteettiä sosiaalisena ilmiönä, joka rakentuu ja jota rakennetaan jatkuvasti vuorovaikutuksessa.</p> <p>Analyysin tulokset osoittavat, että identiteetin rakentuminen pelaajayhteisössä on vahvasti polarisoitunutta, ja tämä vahva polarisaatio johtaa aggressiiviseen käyttäytymiseen ja kielenkäyttöön. Nämä aggressiiviset käyttäytymismallit saattavat osittain tulla ulkopuolisesta maailmasta, mutta ne saattavat olla myös pelaajayhteisössä opittuja malleja, jotka vaikuttavat online- ja pelaajayhteisön ulkopuoliseenkin elämään.</p>	
<b>Asiasanat - Keywords</b> Computer-mediated communication, discourse analysis, social identity	
<b>Säilytyspaikka - Depository</b>	
<b>Muita tietoja - Additional information</b>	

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

My aim for this thesis is to examine identity construction from the perspective of discourse analysis in a role-playing games oriented forum called the RPGCodex. The forum defines itself as valuing “uncensored discussion with minimal moderation, a critical approach towards the games industry (and, well, everything else) and a belief that the RPG genre, and gaming in general, has seen a decline in quality since the early 2000s.”

The forum is characterized as follows in the Urban Dictionary top definition for rpgcodex (2014). Urban Dictionary is by no means a reliable source, but I include it here to give a view what the general consensus of the forum members’ beliefs, attitudes and ideologies is outside the forum. Other definitions of the forum are also quite similar.

*Literally one of the hells in the Internet. This is an internet forum for the discussion of anything that's related to role-playing games but just like most internet forums, they can deviate from that and discuss other things. However, most of the members of that particular forum seems to hate pretty much everything, say curse words all the time, accuse fictional characters of being things that they dislike, and regularly use racist or antisemitic words all the time. Even the moderators are pretty terrible as they also seem to be unable to stop the insanity of the forums and they sometimes even join in the racism, cursing and trolling. Overall, the place is one of the literal hells of the Internet. Seriously, it's on par with youtube comments, gamefaqs message boards and comic book resources in terms of stupidity and insanity.*

*What's the definition of the word rpgcodex?*

*Hell itself.*

I have also followed the forum since 2010 as an outsider (commonly called “a lurker”), without having an account or participating in the discussions. Thus, I have acquired a considerable amount of ethnographical knowledge regarding its culture and habits. As an academic researcher, I have also previously conducted a few small-scale studies analyzing the interaction and discourse in the forum. In one study, the focus was on the

forum's shared culture and group identity, whereas the second study focused on authenticity and authority and how these are linked to construction of a group identity.

I have chosen to observe this particular forum because its approach of "uncensored discussion with minimal moderation" offers interesting social phenomena to analyze further. In the rules section of the forum, the site is described as a place to discuss computer-based role-playing games without fear of getting banned or having one's posts deleted because of their offensive language. In fact, the rules of the forum even state that the users are encouraged to "troll each other as much as you please and incite flame-wars with whichever willing participants you are able to find." The nature of interaction that these rules bring forth is very different from interaction in a more moderated online forum, where people generally aim to behave and treat each other kindly. Other minimally moderated forums where similar rules of interaction are encouraged, such as 4chan, have been studied extensively in different contexts, focusing for example on aggression and collective identity (Sparby 2017), and sexuality and gender (Vuolle 2015). However, to the best of my knowledge, no studies focusing solely on this particular forum (RPGCodex) exist.

One particular issue which often arises in many discussions and is strongly related to identity and the forum's culture is that many members seem to be concerned that video games today are driven by political agenda and are vocally and often viciously against Social Justice Warriors (SJWs), feminism and left-wing politics. This phenomenon conceivably began after the Gamergate controversy in 2014, which centered on issues of sexism and progressivism in video game culture.

To summarize briefly, Gamergate (often referred to with a hashtag in front #Gamergate) is an online movement centered on harassing women in the video game industry and online communities. In February 2013, video game developer Zoë Quinn released a game called *Depression Quest*, dealing with a person suffering from depression based on

personal experiences. The game was generally well received in gaming media, but agitated many gamers who claimed it was pushing a political agenda into video games. Later in 2014, a former boyfriend of Quinn's released a blog post detailing their prior relationship, which among other things implied Quinn having had sexual relations with video game journalists in order to receive favorable ratings for her game. As a consequence, Quinn began receiving death and rape threats. Actor Adam Baldwin was the first to use the hashtag #Gamergate in Twitter referring to these events, contrasting them to a wider political scandal in the manner of Watergate. Since then numerous harassment campaigns against video game developers have been conceived under the #Gamergate banner (Braithwaite 2016, Rogers 2016, Salter 2017: 41-51).

The Gamergate movement and its subsequent events have been studied broadly especially in social sciences, particularly within the context of identity and gender. Braithwaite, in his article *It's About Ethics in Games Journalism? Gamergaters and Geek Masculinity* (2016), argues that Gamergaters produce a masculine gamer identity, in which a typical gamer is seen as a heterosexual white male who has to defend himself from "social justice warriors" (SJWs) who are trying to infiltrate the video game industry pushing political ideologies. According to Braithwaite, various social media platforms operate as "vectors for public discourses about gender, sexual identity, and equality, as well as safe spaces for aggressive and violent misogyny" (Braithwaite 2016: 1).

Similarly, Rogers (2016) explored the issues of gamer identity in his thesis, which focused on identity deployment in the Gamergate controversy. Rogers (2016: 2) asserts that identities are deployed as a form of collective action, and dominant groups "delegitimize critiques, justify hostility towards perceived threats, and reaffirm privilege" to maintain their position. Further, he argues that gamers frequently display elements of hegemonic masculinity, such as rationality, dispassion, prowess and violence to validate their gamer identity.

Such behavior is evident and salient in many memes created and used by the members of RPGCodex, as well as in the vernacular language of the forum. As I tentatively began to examine and analyze the data I had gathered, I noticed that a common element in many topics was someone posing the question whether the game would contain any SJW elements. Here is an example of voiced concern, near the release of *Pathfinder: Kingmaker* (2018):

*Another fantasy rpg, with a setting i don't give a fuck about, season pass with a bunch of dlcs, game is probably full of sjw trash as well. I have a bad feeling about this one. Pass. (Post# 15, Pathfinder: Kingmaker Kickstarter Update #54: Releasing on September 25th, Preorder Available (2018))*

However, not all members agree, which creates controversy:

*The anti-SJW bull-crap is becoming too annoying. It's like people don't even care about the actual games anymore, they're just interested into how "gay" the characters are... as if they're gonna suck their dicks or something. FFS. (Post #136, Pathfinder: Kingmaker Pre-Release Thread (2018))*

One discernible case of this phenomenon was the release of *Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear* in 2016, an expansion to the highly acclaimed *Baldur's Gate* series released more than 15 years after the originals and developed by Beamdog. Shortly after release, the game created major controversy among gamers who claimed that the game was pushing a political agenda and forcing political correctness and social justice upon gamers. This led to online harassment and insults, similar to the earlier Gamergate controversy, and was widely noticed by many big video gaming related websites, such as Eurogamer<sup>1</sup>, Kotaku<sup>2</sup> and Polygon<sup>3</sup>. In RPGCodex, the “#BaldurGate: Siege of

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1 <https://www.eurogamer.net/articles/2016-04-05-new-baldurs-gate-expansion-siege-of-dragonspear-off-to-a-rough-start>

2 <https://kotaku.com/the-social-justice-controversy-surrounding-baldurs-gate-1769176581>

3 <https://www.polygon.com/2016/4/5/11371428/baldurs-gate-dragonspear-trans-statement>

Dragonspear” (note the formatting, a reference to #GamerGate) thread generated more than 170 pages (over 4000 posts) of heated discussion following the release. In addition, there is a news post regarding the release, which also received 28 pages of discussion as comments.

Thus, I have decided to choose that particular thread as my main data for the present study. Not only is the underlying social issue important and relevant today, but also the nature of video game discussion has undeniably changed ever since the events of Gamergate. This is reflected in the identity play of the forum participants. Members are virtually obliged to choose a side – SJW or anti-SJW – in order to have an authoritative opinion, and even those trying to stay neutral or be objective on the matter can easily be labeled by others to either category, as in *“he is a known SJW, don’t listen to him”*. This also raises interesting questions and issues with regard to identity and who has the authority to define who is a gamer and who is not. To show an example from the data, one player is even afraid that he will be labeled a social justice warrior just because he has purchased the game:

*Apr 4 #817: Eh I bought it because it BG(combat and setting), but now Beamdog thinking I bought it because I like their writing and I'm SJW all of sudden. And if there any suits looking for resurrection of D&D they might get a wrong message.*

The focus of this study is identity and identification in computer-mediated discourse, more specifically gamer identity, since the data originates from a video game oriented forum. This study approaches identity as something that is not permanent or fixed, but rather constantly negotiated in discourse: “identity is conceived as an ongoing process, a continuous “performance” (as used by Goffman, 1959) of “identities-in-action” (Weber & Mitchell, 2008), enacted through different communicative resources available to the individual, including those online” (Dooly 2017: 14). According to Leppänen, Westinen and Kytölä (2017: 25), who have studied identity and identification in social media



extensively, identity is “social action in which participants, drawing on resources provided by language(s), discourse(s) and other semiotic modes, engage in identity work, discursively indexing their (lack of) commonality, connectedness and groupness with others”. This study also approaches identity as social action, but in this study, the focus is on language and discourse only. The added elements that multimodal analysis would provide are beyond the scope of this study.

In more detail, this study analyzes what kind of strategies are used to perform gamer identity in the forum discourse. Members of the forum use positive self-presentations and negative other-presentations to construct an authentic and authoritative gamer identity. Notably, a distinction is created between *gamers* and *players* in the discourse. The forum members disidentify themselves from mere *players* of the video game, who are labeled as casual and not true fans. At the same time, they identify themselves as ones who are old-school fans and have invested a great amount of time in the video game, thus legitimizing their position as true *gamers*.

In terms of discourse analysis, positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation can often be seen in “us vs. them” rhetoric, where participants use deictic pointers such as “us”, “we”, “you” and “them” to include and exclude others and to (dis)identify oneself with a specific group. Considering identity, here the deictic pointer “us” can refer to multiple social identities. Is the poster referring to “us ‘true’ gamers”, “us role-playing gamers”, “us members of this forum” or something else? Often the use of the pointers “us” and “we” is contested by others who do not want to identify with the poster in question, which creates interesting data to analyze from the perspective of discourse analysis and power relations – who has the authority to define “us”?

Furthermore, the analysis will examine gamer identity discourse on a more ideological scale, using critical discourse analysis as a tool. It shows how gender and social politics are present and represented in the gaming community, how gamer identity is related to

gender, and how gamer identity is inherently masculine and gender binaries are used to discriminate other genders. Language used to delegitimize minority players is often very hostile and vulgar, and gamers use this discourse to maintain their position and authentic gamer identity.

The following sections will present the theoretical framework and methodology, which guide the analysis. The methodology section will also introduce the data, and discuss some concerns related to research ethics. The analysis consists of two parts, as discussed before, after which there is a section dedicated to discussion of the results and the conclusion of the study.

## 2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1 Computer-mediated communication and discourse

Although the main interest in this study is discourse and identity construction within an online environment, the subject is so broad that the multitude of research fields it touches becomes quite extensive. Computer-mediated communication and digital discourse have been studied not only in the field of discourse studies, but also in sociolinguistics, social psychology and communication studies, not to even mention the vastness of existing research on identity.

An array of different terms have been used to describe research on the use of language in an online environment by different researchers in different periods. Perhaps the most commonly used term is computer-mediated communication (CMC), which includes all forms of communication that is enacted via networked computers. In their book, Cameron and Panović (2014: 4) also mention *interactive written discourse* (Ferrara, Brunner and Whitemore 1991), *digital discourse* (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011), and *digital networked writing* (Androutsopoulos 2011) as some of the terms used in the field.

The problem with CMC is its broadness and its aim to include all communicative activity enabled by computers under the term. To narrow it down, Cameron and Panović (2014: 4) use the term *computer-mediated discourse* (CMD) to describe discourse which results from CMC as an activity. In the present study, I have chosen CMD as the term to be used.

Many attempts have been made in order to classify digital communication systematically. Herring (2007, cited in Cameron and Panović 2014: 5) devised the concept of facets, which are divided into two groups: medium (technological) and situation (social), based on the two basic types of influence that CMD is subject to. Cameron and Panović (2014: 5) have depicted the facets as illustrated below, followed by my application of the scheme to this present study.

**The most important technological/medium facets in Herring's scheme are:**

1. Synchronicity (whether communication is synchronous or asynchronous, i.e. whether or not the participants are online at the same time)
2. Message transmission (one- or two-way)
3. Persistence of transcript (how long messages stay on the system)
4. Size of message buffer (number of characters per message)
5. Channels of communication (potential for multimedia content)
6. Technological affordances of systems (e.g. whether they permit anonymous messaging, private messaging, filtering and quoting)
7. Message format.

**The social/situational facets include (but are not limited to):**

1. Participant structure (one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many; public/private; degree of anonymity; group size, number of active participants...)
2. Participant characteristics (demographics: gender, age, occupation, etc.; language proficiency, computer/CMC skills; role and status in 'real life'; attitudes, beliefs, ideologies...)
3. Purpose (of group, and goal of interaction)
4. Topic or theme (of group or exchanges)
5. Tone (serious/playful; formal/casual; cooperative/sarcastic, etc.)
6. Activity (debate, game, collaborative writing, information exchange, virtual sex, etc.)
7. Norms (of social organization, of appropriateness, of language...)
8. Code (language variety; writing system; font...)

I have applied this scheme to my subject in the following way:

**Technological facets:**

1. Synchronicity: Discussions are asynchronous. There is a synchronous chat function, but no data was gathered from the chat for the purposes of this study, as the topic of the chat discussions may change at a rapid pace, and the discussions are not available for reading for posterity.
2. Message transmission: Messages are not necessarily addressed to a single person, but they can be, and everyone's posts can be quoted and replied to.
3. Persistence of transcript: Indefinite. It should be noted that users are free to edit their messages, and moderators have the freedom to delete or move messages. Otherwise, the content should be available as long as the platform exists. For the purposes of this study, the data was captured and saved locally, so that if messages would get removed or edited later on it would not interfere with the analysis. The final data was captured on March 20, 2019, roughly three years after the original discussion occurred, so it is very unlikely that any messages would be further edited or deleted. It is possible, however, that some messages may have been modified during the time between the original discussion and the date the final data was captured, which is intrinsic to the kind of study in question.
4. Size of message buffer: As far as I know, there are no limitations to the length of the message.
5. Channels of communication: Text is the primary way of communicating. However, participants also often use pictures and especially image manipulations, or memetic pictures. Users can also embed videos and tweets from Twitter to their posts.
6. Technological affordances of systems: Communication happens under a pseudonym. It is possible, however, to have multiple accounts (known typically as 'alts'). Replying

and quoting is possible. Users can also ignore other users, in which case they will not see content posted by them. Private messaging is possible, and users have a 'wall' on their profile page, which can be either private or public, and where other users can leave messages.

7. Message format: Posts are displayed in chronological order.

**Social/situational facets:**

1. Participant structure: Discussions follow many-to-many format and forum members participate in discussions via posting in threads, most of which are public and readable for anyone even without an account. Posting, however, requires one to register an account under a user chosen pseudonym and an optional avatar, a picture to represent your profile, which has to be chosen from a collection of images which mostly consists of video game characters. If a user opts not to choose an avatar a default image will be used instead, which is the forum's mascot, a red stick-figure troll wearing a "rpg codex" shirt. These are the first steps in creating an identity as a member of the forum. The choice of the avatar and the nickname can have an impact on the user's perceived authenticity even before any posts have been made, and the default avatar already implies the shared culture and the group identity of the forum.

As of writing this thesis, there are 19805 registered members in the forum. It should be noted, however, that not all of these accounts are necessarily active. Some may have not been used in many years, some may be duplicates from the same person, and many accounts are just 'lurker' accounts with zero posts. The number of active participants thus is a lot lower, typically ranging from approximately 10 to 100 within a single topic.

2. Participant characteristics: Users are free to give their location on their profile, although it is impossible to confirm whether this information is valid. Some users report pseudolocations, such as "underground" or "nowhere". Based on my own experience over 7 years and the evidence self-provided by users, the largest demographic seems to

be Central and Eastern Europe and Northern America. This is further supported by data - according to traffic statistics analysis from Alexa (2018), the five countries the site is the most accessed from are United States 40.3%, Poland 16.4%, Australia 5.4%, Canada 3.7% and Croatia 3.4%.

Regarding age and gender, it is hard to provide any evidence, but based on my experience and observations, an average user can be of any age between 18 and 40 and any gender. It is notable that as the site caters to role-playing game enthusiasts and the users frequently advocate older role playing games and believe that "the RPG genre, and gaming in general, has seen a decline in quality since the early 2000s" as stated in the forum rules, the site attracts many members who have begun (computer) role-playing gaming in its early years in the 1980s and 1990s. It is frequent to see a user claiming authenticity based on their history in old role-playing games. Users also often share their memories and experiences playing an early role-playing game in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

Not only does the site attract gamers, but also many game developers are known to visit the forum and some are active participants in discussions.

3. Purpose/intention: As a group, to advocate (computer) role-playing gaming. As stated in the forum rules: "Uncensored discussion with minimal moderation, a critical approach towards the games industry (and, well, everything else) and a belief that the RPG genre, and gaming in general, has seen a decline in quality since the early 2000s." Herring (2007: 18) also specifies that this facet is relevant on two levels; purpose as a group, and a more individual "goal of interaction" of each poster, or post. The individual, goal of interaction level is further examined in the present study's analysis.

4. Topic or theme: Role-playing games and gaming in general, although relevant to this study, it must be mentioned that 'social issues' and political agenda in video games is also a frequently discussed topic.

5. Tone: Due to the nature of uncensored discussions and minimal moderation, the tone is often aggressive, offensive and abusive. One of the purposes of this study is to explore possible reasons behind the aggressive language and behavior.

6. Activity: Mostly exchanging information and knowledge about role-playing games, but also debating and regularly ranking or polling for top voted games.

7. Norms: One of the interests of this study is to determine what kinds of unwritten norms the forum members seem to follow and exhibit. This is also related to the concepts of (dis)identification and social identity. I hypothesize that violation of certain norms may incite aggressive behavior and cause users to disclaim another user's authority. As an example of this, the forum has a rating system and users may rate a post as "retarded" or "shit", if they disagree. Moderators may also give posters various tags such as "dumbfuck" or "shitposter", if the community frequently wishes for it.

8. Code: Although English is the de facto language of the forum, participants come from many different nationalities, an information which they may optionally include in their profile. It is not infrequent to see other languages being used in different contexts, however, which contributes to constructing identity through code-switching. Querying the Alexa web analysis site demographics, it seems that circa 16% of the site visitors came from Poland (2018). Indeed, Polish language can sometimes be seen in discussions. I have also witnessed Japanese, Finnish, Russian and Portuguese among others. Another curious phenomenon is the abundance of racial slurs being used, made possible by the minimal moderation. To illustrate, here is a post from the thread titled "#BaldurGate: Siege of Dragonspear" (2016), supposedly a reaction to hearing the price of the just released game:

fuck beandoge jews, gonna buy it the old-fashioned potato way than :smug: (Post #15, #BaldurGate: Siege of Dragonspear (2016))



The racial slur 'jews' is often used by the forum participants to depict developers who they consider greedy or who in the posters' opinion charge too much for their games. The game developer company Beamdog has been mangled into 'beandoge'. 'Potato', in gaming and internet culture, is often used to describe something cheap or being of a low quality. The 'old-fashioned potato way' most likely refers to piracy or acquiring the game through gray market.

In terms of this research, the technological facets mostly serve to explain the technological features and limitations inherent in this communication format. The social/situational facets are more relevant considering the analysis, and will be referred to when examining identity performance.

## **2.2 (Social) Identity and Discourse**

Elinor Ochs (1996, cited in Hall 2002: 33) defines social identity as follows: "Social identity encompasses participant roles, positions, relationships, reputations, and other dimensions of social personae, which are conventionally linked to epistemic and affective stances."

From the perspective of social identity theory, identity is separated into a personal identity and a social identity. One's conception of self consists of one's unique personal attributes (personal identity) as well as multiple social identities, based on different groups the individual belongs to. According to this theory, social identity may take precedence in groups, in which case one begins to see oneself more as a member of a group and not as a unique individual. This process of switching active identities from personal to social is called *depersonalization*. (Rösner & Krämer 2016: 3).

Another similar and important process is *deindividuation*, originating from social psychology, according to which "people lose their inner constraints and feel less self-aware, inhibited, and responsible for their behavior when they are anonymous" (Rösner

& Krämer 2016: 1). This theory has been applied to computer-mediated communication, producing the social identity model of deindividuation effects (SIDE model). Although the original deindividuation theory argues that anonymity is a key factor explaining online aggression, the SIDE model suggests that mere anonymity may not directly lead to identity loss and anti-social behavior. Rather, the SIDE model proposes that “anonymity reduces the salience of inter-individual differences and fosters a salient social identity, which intensifies conformity to a prevalent social norm.” (Rösner & Krämer 2016: 3).

Thus, the SIDE model implies that if the social norm of a discussion board is aggressive communication and behavior, individual posters assume this social identity and begin to behave accordingly. Further, Rösner and Krämer (2016: 3) argue that the greater the level of identification between the individual and the group, the more likely one is to adopt the social identity in favor of the personal identity. On the other hand, if the social norm of the group interaction is not aggressive, participants are also more likely to behave non-aggressively, despite the anonymity. Interestingly, Rösner & Krämer (2016: 8) also found out in their respective study focusing on a blog’s comment section that anonymity did not seem to have a direct effect, but the tendency to conform to an aggressive social norm of commenting was stronger in an anonymous environment.

Considering the implications of this from the perspective of social identity theory raises interesting questions: as one assumes and constructs these numerous social identities in different groups and environments, they arguably also shape one’s personal identity, which in turn shapes the forming of social identities. Although this study focuses on identities within an online environment, this is inevitably reflected in one’s identity and behavior in offline contexts as well. Considering that, it is conceivable that if one participates in groups that have aggressive social norms online and identifies strongly with those groups, one may also be more likely to adapt these norms into one’s life outside online environments.

Another interesting factor to consider is the multifacetedness of social identity. According to classical social identity theory (Tajfel 1972, as cited by Rösner & Krämer 2016: 3), a person can have a different social identity for each group he or she belongs to. Is it not possible, however, that one may also have multiple overlaying social identities functioning at the same time, depending on context? Especially within an online environment such as a discussion board, where the interaction is asynchronous, a person may assume different social identities in different threads, or when responding to a different person, or when purposefully trolling others. These questions have many interesting implications for further research and have relevance in multiple fields besides linguistics and discourse analysis, such as sociology, psychology and communication.

While the social identity theory introduced above takes a more psychological approach to discourse and identity, in linguistics social identity has been researched from a number of different perspectives. A traditional sociolinguistic approach is variationist sociolinguistics (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 26), which focuses on the relationship between language use and social identity. It typically involves ethnographic observation of language variations, such as accent, dialect or grammar, during a period of time with the aim of making correlations with different social categories, such as age or gender. Benwell and Stokoe propose that “What variationist approaches arguably do is carve the world into a series of finite categories into which their object of study is then moulded and shaped” (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 27).

Variationist sociolinguistics has received criticism because it usually deems the relationship between social identity and linguistic behavior to be causal, for instance being a woman leading to increased politeness, or using colloquial language and swearing a lot being a reflection of masculinity (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 26-27). Cameron (cited in Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 26) argues this to be “an example of the ‘correlational fallacy’, by which one description is yoked situationally and often

coincidentally to another and assumed to offer an *explanation* of social or linguistic behaviour.”

Within an online environment this categorization becomes even more difficult, as linguistic variations may happen at such a rapid pace, and language in an online environment inherently contains much more variations because of the technological facets made possible by the medium. Long-term observation is also more difficult to perform, because the number of participants within an online community may be thousands. The translocal nature of online discussions also makes categorizing harder – an online community may have participants from anywhere in the world. Even if the discussions happen in a shared, common language, some participants may be native and some may not. Thus, it becomes difficult for the analyst to infer correlations between language variations and social groups such as age or gender.

While there are many possible approaches to language and identity within the field of linguistics, Bucholtz and Hall (2005) have introduced a framework consisting of five principles for the analysis of identity in linguistic interaction, which take a more interactional and performative approach than the variationist sociolinguistic approach. Under this framework, they have attempted to incorporate linguistic perspectives on identity from many interdisciplinary fields, such as the various subfields of sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis and social psychology (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 586).

The definition of identity used by the researchers is “Identity is the social positioning of self and other” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 586). Further, they note that while identity has recently accumulated the interest of many sociolinguistic researchers, there is a concrete lack of theories and frameworks focused on the subject and thus there is a need for new frameworks in the field of discourse analysis and identity. These principles outline different perspectives that sociolinguistic scholars have approached the question of

identity in the recent years (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 607). Since this research also approaches the concept of identity from the perspective of interaction, these principles offer a solid framework for the analysis.

The five principles proposed by Bucholtz and Hall are Emergence, Positionality, Indexicality, Relationality and Partialness. According to the first principle of Emergence, identity is to be viewed as a social and cultural phenomenon, and it is constructed emergently in discourse rather than being a pre-existing psychological phenomenon (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 588).

The Positionality principle argues that identity at the same time may encompass multiple overlapping facets – both macro- and micro-level, as well as temporary interactional positions, such as joke teller or engaged listener. This principle also challenges the earlier variationist sociolinguistic view of language variations correlating with macro identity categories (e.g. age and gender). While the variationist approach may be well suited to capture large-scale sociolinguistic trends, it is less effective when analysing nuanced, micro-level identity relations in local contexts (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 591). Bucholtz and Hall also note that the analyst should take into account all these multiple dimensions of identities in attaining a more complete picture of how identity works (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 593).

The third principle, Indexicality, proposes that identities may be indexed linguistically through labels and implicatures, as well as linguistic structures which are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 594). Considering the present research, the frequently used term ‘SJW’, Social Justice Warrior, could be considered to be an example of such explicit identification index. Indexicality also includes the concept of stance, which is characterized by John Du Bois (2002, cited in Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 595) as follows: “I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and align [or disalign] with you.” This concept is also very similar with the concept of (dis)identification discussed earlier in this study.

Relationality principle proposes that “Identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 598). According to this principle, identities are never autonomous and always require social relations with other participants. Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 599) call these relational pairs tactics of intersubjectivity. They propose a framework consisting of three pairs – *adequation* and *distinction*, *authentication* and *denaturalization*, and *authorization* and *illegitimation*. Bucholtz and Hall emphasize, however, that this framework is not meant to replace the other principles, but it helps in examining the relational aspect of identity.

To summarize these relational pairs, adequation and distinction draw on the similarities and differences. Adequation involves the highlighting of sameness and similar features while downplaying any differences which would disrupt identity construction. On the other hand, distinction suppresses the similarities in order to emphasize the differences. Authentication and denaturalization concern genuineness and the production of identity that is genuine. This pair is especially relevant in the present study – concerning who is a real gamer and who is not. Denaturalization means discrediting and one’s identity as not real. The final pair, authorization and illegitimation deal with the affirmation of identity through institutionalized power and ideology, and how identities are also delegitimized by the same structures. (Bucholz and Hall 2004: 382-387, 2005: 599-605).

The last of the five principles, Partialness, proposes that a performance of identity may at the same time be deliberate and intentional, as well as unconscious and habitual. Further, it is constantly shifting in interaction and it may be a part of larger ideological processes, or an outcome of others’ perceptions and representations (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 606).

### **2.3 Collective identity and online aggression**

Sparby (2017) has studied aggressive behavior online in an anonymous imageboard, 4chan. She argues that aggressive online rhetoric is often ‘memetic’, in other words

“uncritical recapitulations of previous behaviors or of the way users believe they are “supposed” to behave” (Sparby 2017: 85). Her study followed displays of collective identity in the responses posted in two threads where a transwoman self-identified and induced a collective aggression from the posters. However, in the second thread, a different rhetoric was used which, according to Sparby, ruptured the collective identity and opened constructive dialogue. Thus, she argues that in order to create more productive discourse online, which can often be arduous because of the aggression and the memetic rhetoric, it is vital to recognize and disrupt this negative behavior. (Sparby 2017: 96)

Regarding RPGCodex, the forum members have various ways of referring to themselves as a collective entity, such as the ‘Kodex Kritikal Konsensus (KKK)’<sup>4</sup>. The forum has an achievement system<sup>5</sup>, where various titles for various actions are awarded to frequent posters. The achievement titles provide a lot of insight into the kind of offensive language used in the forum, such as ‘Slut’ or ‘Manwhore’, both of which are rewards for receiving a large amount of ‘brofists’, which are the forum’s equivalent for likes. It also provides useful examples of explicitly acknowledging the collective identity. For example, an achievement titled ‘Codexian’ states the following: “Congratulations! You are now one with the hive mind.” One of the titles, ‘I cried for Hillary’, was awarded to posters who self-identified (or were identified) as Hillary Clinton supporters during the 2016 United States presidential election. The subtitles for the achievement declare “It’s on the other side of the wall for you!”, and posters who received the title in question had their posts hidden behind a transparent image of prison bars for a period of time. This is an example of shaping the collective identity and conducting normativity. In this example, the average *Codexian* should have been supporting Donald Trump, lest their posts be hidden behind bars.

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4 <https://rpgcodex.net/forums/index.php?threads/kodex-kritikal-konsensus-what-is-an-rpg.63589/>

5 <https://rpgcodex.net/forums/index.php?help/trophies>

This kind of language is certainly not unique to RPGCodex. Most notably, it shares many of the same qualities with the imageboard 4chan, which has been studied extensively in the context of verbal aggression and online harassment. 4chan's collective identity is also often referred to as 'the hivemind' (Sparby 2017: 87), especially its sub-board /b/, notorious for its memes, political incorrectness and misogyny (Braithwaite 2016: 5; Sparby 2017: 89; Vuolle 2015: 33).

## **2.4 Gamer identity and gender**

Considering the context of #Gamergate and the topic in question, it is necessary to consider gender identity within the context of gaming and gamer identity. Historically, gaming has been a male dominated industry and games have been targeted towards a young, white male audience, which is also reflected in video game narratives – heroes and protagonists in many video games have also typically been heteronormative Caucasian males, whereas female characters have been represented as damsels in distress while also being overly sexualized (Braithwaite 2016: 1, Salter 2017: 42-43).

In the recent years, however, the situation has begun to change and the industry has seen a rise in the number of female gamers as well as game developers. In fact, recent statistics from The Entertainment Software Association (2018) show that 60% of Americans play video games daily, and 45% of the gamers are women. Yet regarding gamer identity, simply playing video games does not make one a gamer. The whole concept of who qualifies as a gamer is constantly being contested and negotiated (Braithwaite 2016: 2). Shaw (2013: n. pag) argues: "Like other forms of identity, being a gamer is defined in relation to dominant discourses about who plays games, the deployment of subcultural capital, the context in which players find themselves, and who are the subjects of game texts."



In another study, Shaw (2011) interviewed voluntary players of video games from marginalized groups in order to study their gamer identity. Interestingly, she found out that some of the participants “rejected gamer identity in part, because they viewed games as peripheral to mainstream media culture, a guilty pleasure, a juvenile pastime, and as a medium that is inherently unimportant” (Shaw 2011: 40). Thus, it is often the “true gamers” who most vocally defend their position as gamers and other, more casual players of video games do not consider such identity label to be of importance to them.

Rogers (2016: 6-7), who studied identity deployment in the Gamergate controversy, used the concept of hegemonic masculinity to describe the masculinity that gamers portray. According to the concept of hegemony, gendered power and inequality are results of a dominant group maintaining and legitimizing its authority by production and manipulation of culture. This hegemonic power is invisible and deeply structuralized into society, thus appearing natural and legit. Rogers argues that participants in the chat data he studied implicitly draw on elements of hegemonic masculinity, such as rationality, dispassion, prowess, and violence, and use narratives of victimization to portray themselves as lone wolves struggling against the system. Braithwaite (2016: 1), who studied various Gamergate discussions across multiple social media platforms, also noted that Gamergaters often identify themselves as the real victims of #Gamergate, oppressed by social justice warriors and their calls for diversity.

Vermeulen, Vanden Abeele and Van Bauwel (2016: 1) have also studied strategies in deploying masculine gamer identity and they identified three central strategies: “(1) the use of novel gendered binaries to frame the masculine against a feminine gamer identity, (2) the use of hostile sexist assaults to silence feminist gamers and advocates, and (3) the use of dualistic postfeminist discourses to mitigate and undermine criticisms.”

Similar strategies were also used by the posters in the present study. The forum members made a distinction between *gamers* and *players*, and players were labeled as “casual” and

“minority”. According to Vermeulen et al., “by redefining the gender binary in gaming as one between casual (i.e., feminine) and hardcore (i.e., masculine) players, “gamers” attempt to strategically reassert a dominant masculine gamer identity”. In the present study, one of the game’s writers was also labeled as a “feminazi”, and hostile and sexist language was widely used by many posters.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this section is to introduce the tools of discourse analysis, which are used to analyze strategies of performing gamer identity in the discussion, and to connect the previously discussed theoretical framework with these tools. Further, this section will also present the research question and introduce the data. Some issues regarding research ethics and privacy are also addressed.

#### 3.1 Methodological framework

As a larger methodological framework, this study uses computer-mediated discourse analysis as a toolset to analyze how identities are performed in online interaction in the thread *#BaldurGate: Siege of Dragonspear (2016)* on the forum RPGCodex. This includes elements from discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA). It is worth noting, as pointed out by Herring (2004: 4), that it is better to consider computer-mediated discourse analysis as an approach, rather than a singular method. Based on the function of the forum (a video game related, more specifically role-playing game oriented forum) and the researcher's a priori knowledge, the analysis will focus on the performance of gamer identity.

According to Ainsworth and Hardy (2004: 240), identities in CDA are constructed by "defining groups, their interests, their position within society, and their relationship to other groups". She also notes that participants construct identity at the same time not only as individuals, but also as members of multiple other social categories, and the identities are a result of "contradictory interplay of discourses", instead of being something permanent and stable. Various groups with opposing interests may try to use discourse to gain advantage and power, and CDA can be used to analyze this relationship between power and identities performed in discourse.

Ainsworth and Hardy's theory of identity construction in CDA can easily be applied to the present study. The main group here is the forum RPGCodex and its members. Their interests are gaming and video games, more specifically role-playing games. Their position in the gaming community is to uphold their role as authoritative and authentic gamers, which can be seen in the analysis when examining their relationship to other video game players.

Considering gender identity in relation to gamer identity, the question of power relations and authority becomes relevant. Seeing how the concept of gamer identity is constantly being negotiated, critical discourse analysis becomes a useful tool to analyze how the dominant group attempts to maintain its position of power within the discourses of gamer identity. As critical discourse analysis deals with the concepts of ideology and power (Fairclough and Wodak 1997), the structure of ideology within the context of this discourse analysis must be established. For the purposes of using CDA in this analysis, I approach the online community of RPGCodex as an ideological group. Van Dijk (2011: 386) proposes the following general schema for structurizing the fundamentals of an ideologic group:

Identity (Who are we? Who belong to us? Where do we come from?)
Activities (What do we usually do? What is our task?)
Goals (What do we want to obtain?)
Norms and values (What is good/bad, permitted/prohibited for us?)
Group relations (Who are our allies and opponents?)
Resources (What is the basis of our power, or our lack of power?)

In terms of this analysis, this schema can be linked with Herring's facet model introduced in the theoretical framework section. The first category, identity, corresponds with Herring's social facets participant structure and participant characteristics. Activities, goals and norms relate to purpose/intention, activity and norms facets in Herring's model. What is important to note here, is that Herring's facet model does not contain facets which would explain the last two categories, group relations and resources. From the perspective of CDA and ideological discourse, these categories are very meaningful, and other tools of discourse analysis must be considered to answer these questions. The second part of the analysis focuses more on this ideological discourse and aims to examine identity performance on an ideological level. These ideological themes are also explored further in the discussion section following the analysis.

Thus, to analyze how identity is performed using the above categories as well as Herring's social facets as a tool, strategies for identity deployment also have to be categorized. The central category here is positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, which is perhaps the most salient identity marker and an expression of ingroupness or outgroupness, most commonly expressed through pronouns *Us* and *Them*. As Duszak (2002: 6) notes: "Both *we* and *they* can be skillfully managed in discourse in order to construct, redistribute or change the social values of ingroupness and outgroupness."

This analysis uses the following categories, which have been compiled and adapted using Van Dijk's (2006: 373, 2015: 73) proposed discourse structures, as well as Bucholtz and Hall's (2004: 382-387, 2005: 599-605) tactics of intersubjectivity as a framework:

### **Positive self-presentation / Negative other-presentation**

Indexicality or deictic pointers: Explicitly (dis-)identifying with others, or other groups, using indices or labels. Example: “Us rpgcodexers...”

Lexicon: Word choices, typically positive words for representing *Us*, and negative words for representing *Them*. Example: “Of course they couldn't help but shit on a storied franchise with their SJW crap.” Words of excrement are used to describe *their* actions, ruining our ‘storied franchise’.

Rhetorical figures of speech: hyperbole, euphemisms, metonymies, metaphors. Example of a hyperbole: “You got to love how the codex always get's blamed for EVERYTHING!”

Syntax/code: Active vs. passive sentences, linguistic idiosyncrasy or particular vernacular and colloquisms. Example of using strong British vernacular: “... I mean fuck me its like games a fucking carer wipin drool off o players chin an tellin em how to wipe their arse ...”

### 3.2 Research questions

The final research questions were modeled after Herring's (2004: 7) definition of good and proper research questions for computer-mediated discourse analysis, the criteria for which are: 1) they are empirically answerable from the available data 2) they are non-trivial 3) they are motivated by a hypothesis and 4) they are open-ended.

The questions for the present study are as follows:

1. What strategies are used to perform gamer identity in the forum discussions?
2. In what ways does the gamer identity relate to other identities, such as gender? Can any ideological discourse structures be identified?

The analysis is divided into two sections, providing answers for both research questions respectively.

### 3.3 Ethical considerations

This research aims to follow the Ethical Principles of the University of Jyväskylä. Considering the nature of social media research, there is no static set of rules to follow, as social media platforms are constantly evolving and flexible by nature.

The research strives to avoid centering on any individual poster and instead aims to give a diverse representation of the discussion and all participants involved. As noted in the section in the theoretical framework detailing participant structure in the forum, the number of active participants is always much lower than the amount of total registered members. Within this data, in this single discussion and within the one month's timeframe, the number of unique posters was a few hundred.

It should be noted that the posters operate under nicknames and no real personal information is shared, so the discussions are by nature quite anonymous. The forum terms and rules also mention that all user-generated content becomes public once posted and advises users not to post on the forum if they do not want to make their content available to be seen by the whole world. This research has also decided to not include the user names in the post excerpts, as they serve no purpose in terms of the analysis; only the content of the posts is analyzed. The posts are referred to by their chronological post number instead.

The purpose of this approach is to avoid foregrounding the vocal minority, a group of a few most active posters strongly and frequently voicing their opinions, which may or may not be representative of the silent majority. Another reason for this is to avoid defaming or denigrating any single poster. Considering the size of the forum, it would be impossible to personally approach every single poster for permission to use their content for research.

### 3.4 Data

Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear was released on March 31, 2016 and the forum thread on RPGCodex was created on the same day. The discussion data that will be used for analysis occurred between April 1 and April 30, 2016 and was gathered on March 20, 2019. The time period of one month was chosen for this study for it was the most active period of discussion. Up until April 29, the thread received multiple posts per day, and afterwards there are many days or weeks in between posts. Also this one month's period already contains 3,708 posts, which is more than enough data to analyze for a study of this size.

At first I had planned to choose 3-6 topics of discussion which follow the release of a major computer role-playing game from a selected time period. The reasoning behind this was that an impending release of a new major RPG arouses a lot of discussion and emotion from the members and presents a great window to the culture and identity of the forum. However, as I began to roughly gather data, I quickly noticed that it was very hard to discern discourse data that would be valuable for this study. A thread may receive hundreds of posts a day, many of which discuss game mechanics or such information which has little merit concerning this research.

Another approach I considered was to randomize the initial data, for example by choosing a number of most recent threads or parts of threads at different time intervals, which I would have proceeded to narrow down selectively, omitting the threads and posts which did not contain any relevant material for this study. A similar method was recently used in a study by Vuolle (2015), the subject of which was gender and sexuality on an image board 4chan. For this present study, however, such a method provided data that was too incoherent to gain any useful results.



### 3.4.1 Data transcription

The posts have been transcribed using the following notation style, indicating the date of the post, the sequence number of the post in the thread, and the actual message. If there are usernames in the messages, they are anonymized as [username]. The parts in the language that are relevant to the analysis are underlined and examined in detail in the analysis below the message. The researcher has attempted to preserve any other markings in the post made by the original writer, such as strikethrough or bolding, to preserve possible emphasis when analysing the meaning. In case the poster has emphasized a word using italics, it will be marked using the HTML-notation `<i></i>`. Cases of obvious misspelling are marked with [sic] after the word.

*Apr 3 2016 #414: Any new impressions on the gameplay/content besides trannies and imagined mansplaining?*

Emojis, which are usually shown as images in the forum, were transcribed in their embedded code format and are explained when necessary in the context of the analysis. If the post includes other multimodal elements, such as videos, their content will be briefly explained in [brackets] if relevant to the context. If multiple post excerpts are grouped together, the date is only marked in the first post, unless it changes in between posts.

### 3.5 Timeline of the discussion

To give a sense of the general discussion activity, a rough timeline of the discussion and key events or turning points is presented below. These key events serve to explain why the posting activity increased or decreased at certain time points noticeably.

(Pages with the default view of 25 posts per page)

Mar 31, 2016: #1 - #64 (Pages 1 - 3 total posts: 64) – Thursday, game release date

Apr 1, 2016: #65 - #279 (Pages 3 - 12, total posts: 214) - Initial impression from the game

Apr 2, 2016: #280 - #410 (Pages 12 - 17, total posts: 130) - The transgender character gets explicitly mentioned

Apr 3, 2016: #411 - #774 (Pages 17 - 31, total posts: 363) - Discussion "turned it into a complete shitshow overnight"

Apr 4, 2016: #775 - #1349 (Pages 31 - 54, total posts: 574) - Monday, gaming media begins coverage on the controversy, developers begin to respond to community, discussion in full swing

Apr 5, 2016: #1350 - #1597 (Pages 54 - 64, total posts: 247)

Apr 6, 2016: #1598 - #2039 (Pages 64 - 82, total posts: 441) - Official statement from the game developers issued

Apr 7, 2016: #2040 - #2387 (Pages 82 - 96, total posts: 347) - After the statement the developers deem the matter officially resolved from their part and stop arguing with community

Apr 8, 2016: #2388 - #2635 (Pages 96 - 106, total posts: 247) - Discussion begins to slow down

Apr 9, 2016: #2636 - #2812 (Pages 106 - 113, total posts: 176)

As can be seen, the activity in the discussion peaked on April 4<sup>th</sup>, when 574 posts were sent. The most active period can be identified as April 3<sup>rd</sup> - April 7<sup>th</sup>, after which the rate of posting decreased noticeably. Thus, the analysis also focuses on the most active period when the discussion was the most lively. The two most active dates, April 4<sup>th</sup> and April 6<sup>th</sup> were the dates when the game developer team responded to the gamers' accusations, and the discussion quickly slowed down after the developers made an official statement

on the matter and closed most discussions on their official forums because of antagonizing and harassment.

After this point in the discussion there is not much relevant content to analyze concerning this research. From April 5<sup>th</sup> onwards, the number of posts per day decreases dramatically, and mostly the same, small vocal group keeps repeating the same patterns as examined in this analysis, after which the discussion quickly derails to other subjects and eventually stops.

## 4 ANALYSIS

The actual analysis is divided into two subsections. In the first part, the focus is on using positive/negative presentations of self/other in performances of gamer identity. The purpose of this section is to analyze what kind of strategies are used to perform and construct gamer identity. The posters also use different strategies to legitimize their position as a “true” gamer, and make distinction between the terms “player” and “gamer”.

The second part focuses on gamer identity in relation to gender, and examines identity politics on a more ideological level.

It should be noted here, that the analysis follows the discussion mostly chronologically, although occasionally similar expressions of identity may be linked together and analyzed in consecutively. There also may be long gaps between analyzed posts, since it is the nature of this methodology not to analyze every single message.

### 4.1 Identifying as a gamer

For the first 150 posts, the participants are mostly discussing the game itself and its mechanics. Some posters voice concern over a transgender character and “SJW elements” (social justice warrior) in the game, but the tone of the discussion mostly stays calm. After this point, one user posts a screenshot of the dialogue of a transgender character, which was to become the main source for the later controversy (Figure 1).

From here onwards, the focus of the discussion begins to shift towards the character and dialogue line in question. Initial reactions show concern from participants:

*Apr 1 #155: I think we need more context on that line of dialogue. Is it meant as a joke or are they actually serious about this?*

*Apr 1 #156: It's quite obviously serious. It's quite obviously really bad, out of place and jarring. It's also quite obviously only 3 lines of dialogue from a random NPC [non-playable character] that sits at the edge of the map.*

*Not that that will stop anyone here from writing a thesis about it. WE MUST GO DEEPER*

*Apr 1 #159: What I find jarring is there's no option for: "Go away you freak!" or something like that.*



*Figure 1. Mizhena: When I was born, my parents thought me a boy and raised me as such. In time, we all came to understand I was truly a woman. I created my new name from syllables of different languages. All have special meaning to me; it is the truest reflection of who I am.*

The discussion then carries on about the game, with some passing comments regarding the inclusion of a transgender character. Another significant point in the topic happens on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, when a new poster joins the discussion, mentioning 4chan:

*Apr 2 #388: I just was checking around 4chan. Is there seriously a "transgender" character called Mizhena in the game? FFS Beamdog.*

The poster explicitly identifies as a 4chan reader and questions the game developers for their decision to include a transgender character in the game. He also mentions the character's name, Mizhena, to which he later returns to comment (post #420) "[...] is it more political correct to add a man who wants to be a female with the Czech words for "Femalemale" as a name from "Other languages" not even in the fucking setting".

After this point the focus of discussion moves notably to discussing gender and its place in video games, and the discussion concerning gamer and gender identity begins. Since the imageboard 4chan was notoriously involved in the #Gamergate controversy (see Braithwaite 2016, Salter 2017: 41-51), it being mentioned here is worth noticing, as the events and discussion surrounding the release of the game in question can be seen as a continuum of the #Gamergate events.

Considering Herring's social/situational facets, it is relevant to consider the purpose, or the goal of interaction in this scenario. Poster #388 has a clear role in how the topic of the discussion begins to shift from here on, and he takes a clear stance against the inclusion of a transgender character in the game. After his initial post he persistently keeps mentioning the transgender character, while also maintaining his stance and taking a dramatic, exaggerating tone, even suggesting that the transgender character is possessed:

*Apr 2 #395: God. This shit in fantasy games has always baffled me. Why is it there? Why is it needed? Why do parents allow maybe their only child to be a weirdo? And how come they haven't taken her/him/it to a priest? Maybe the child is possessed?*

The poster's tone is very provoking, although at this point not aggressive. He keeps asking a number of questions in each post, inviting others to share their stance, and uses passive voice rather than directing the message at anyone in particular. The use of expletives in the vocabulary is also much less frequent than in later posts in the topic. The discussion is not yet strongly polarized, and the poster does not identify "us" or "them".

Rather, the writer uses the deictic pointer “me”, thus he is not identifying with any group or community.

Interestingly, at this point the majority of posters are still discussing the game mechanics and graphical technicalities, but with actively raising the subject of the transgender character and questioning its inclusion, other posters begin to reply directly to his posts and the topic of the discussions begins to shift from mechanics to the transgender character and political correctness, to the point that one poster interrupts the discussion asking whether anyone has any “new impressions on the gameplay/content besides trannies and imagined mansplaining” (post #414).

An explicit turning point in the discussion where the focus of discussion shifted and detracted from the game and its mechanics happens on April 3<sup>rd</sup>:

*Apr 3 #494: lol I like how [username] barged into this thread with NEWS FROM 4CHAN and turned it into a complete shitshow overnight*

Interestingly, this poster explicitly identifies the poster of the previous excerpts in the discussion, who according to him turned the discussion into a “complete shitshow” and takes a stance against him, although the message is not addressed to him directly. The choice of words ‘barged’ and ‘turned’ also creates the impression that the poster here is implying that the previous poster’s intention was to deliberately create sensation and turn the discussion into a “shitshow”.

From this point onward, the aggression begins to escalate as more screenshots of in-game dialogue start to appear, with posters claiming them to contain political agenda that is being forced to them. The us and them division gets stronger and stronger. People also start to dig up the game writers' names and profiles and insulting them personally. This also shows as an increase in the rate of posts per day - on April 3 200 more posts were

sent than on April 2, and subsequently the rate increased by 200 posts per day on April 4, which was the most active day in the timeline of the discussion.

The term SJW is first used on page 10:

*Apr 1 #246: Of course they couldn't help but shit on a storied franchise with their SJW crap.*

*One look at these subhuman beta fucks tells you all you need to know about the beamdog team and the "quality" of content they're going to deliver*

*Between gaidier and their even worse existing team, you know whatever they release next will be full of modern biowarisms, including all the anachronistic sociopolitical commentary and shit tier romances you could possibly want.*

This post is significant in the sense that the language used is notably more hostile and aggressive than any posts in the earlier discussions. This is evident in the expletives, such as “shit on a storied franchise” and “SJW crap”. Words of excrement are used for describing their actions, ruining a ‘storied franchise’. This also marks the point where the “us and them” division in the discussion begins to escalate. The game developer company, Beamdog, is labeled as “them”, who are then depicted as “subhuman beta fucks”. The poster clearly disidentifies from Beamdog and the games they create, thus establishing an identity where he or she is against social justice warriors and their “anachronistic sociopolitical commentary”. This is a very strong example of negative other-presentation.

Another rhetoric used here is the extrapolation in making the assumption that “you know whatever they release next will be full of modern biowarisms”, a claim which is evidently based on a single screenshot of a transgender character in the game. This serves to paint Beamdog as a target for other people to attack. Implicitly, it could also be seen that this post is an invitation for other posters to identify with the poster, by making the game developers seem as individuals who represent the wrong kind of gamer identity.



At this point in the discussion the post is ignored by others and the topic carries on about the game itself and its mechanics. Nobody replies to the poster or quotes it, although it has been “brofisted”, or liked, 7 times. As noted in the timeline section, the focus of the discussion shifts towards gamer identity and social justice warriors a day later.

The following excerpts are examples of using deictic pointers to explicitly create identification and disidentification, and to take a strong position. The post #456 is a direct reply to post #454. In post #454, the deixis “they” is used to point at the game developers, and “players” to point at the people who play the game. The post #456, however, makes an important distinction – “players” is separated from “the Codex”, or “we”, indicating that just playing the game does not make one a “true” gamer, what the members of the RPGCodex represent. The use of the term “players” here is referring to *other* players outside this forum, thus it is another example of disidentification.

*Apr 3 #454: You know watching Shane's lets play o this an i'm amazed by all retard friendly features, I mean fuck me its like games a fucking carer wipin drool off o players chin an tellin em how to wipe their arse, how fucking thick do devs think their audience is to need all this handholding? I mean maybe its just me being an old fuck, an growin up wi games where you weren't talked down to or had your hand held constantly, but either devs o game are as thick as shit or they think players are.*

*Apr 3 #456: The problem with that is, the players *<i>are</i> thick as shit. :negative: Try looking up any title the Codex is generally approving of on another forums and you'll see what we're up against.**

The division created between gamers and players is intriguing. Although the term gamer is often used to refer to all people who play video games, especially by the media, it is important to make a distinction between people who identify as a gamer and people who are labeled gamers from the outside, as pointed out by Shaw (2011: 29). The poster identifies with other members of RPGCodex by the use of the deixis ‘we’. To note is also the way the writer positions himself, and in fact not only himself but the entire forum,

against “the players” - other people who play the game, but do not have such experience or knowledge to qualify as a gamer, something that members of “the Codex” supposedly have.

Going back to the facet theory by Herring (2007, cited in Cameron and Panović 2014: 5), the use of social/situational facets can be seen in post #454, concerning Participant characteristics. The poster is using his age to create and maintain authenticity here, with expressions such as “me being an old fuck” and “growin up wi games where you weren’t talked down”. The poster also makes an implication that the gaming culture has changed, and poses an interesting question: is it the game developers who have changed, or is it the gamers (or players, as referred to by the writer)?

Another notable aspect of post #454 is the syntax and code of the writer, which is rather unique and differs from the norm. The poster in question, Neanderthal, uses distinctive vernacular and very colloquial language consistently in his writing, with expressions such as “growin up wi games”, “wipin drool off o players chin an tellin em how to wipe their arse”, imitating a particular pronunciation in his writing style. In his profile, he also has inputted “Granbretan” as optional information for his location.

Thus, the social identity that the poster performs here becomes very strong and explicit, in terms of participant characteristics. The effect of this vernacular is difficult to analyze, but it is worth noticing that by using such language, the poster becomes distinguished from the depersonalized, deindividuated collectivity and thus may gain more authenticity. Another effect of using this particular code is to assume an identity of a native English speaker, also contributing to authenticity. Another factor of performing the identity of an authentic gamer is using age to draw distinction from other players, and to establish a position of experience: “maybe its just me being an old fuck”.

Going back to Bucholtz and Hall's (2005: 599) relationality principle, the poster uses distinction rather than adequation in order to disidentify with the game's supposed target audience and the game developers. The poster expresses dissatisfaction with current game developers, who are including in their games "retard friendly features" and making games accessible to a wider audience, and his position seems to become the goal of interaction in this post. Once again, considering the division between gamers and players, the writer here disidentifies from other players, and more so from the developers - thus he portrays himself as an outsider. Instead of using collective deictic pointers, such as "we" or "us", he uses the pronouns "I" and "me".

The deictic pointer "us" has now been used by many posters to refer to the RPGCodex community, or the "true gamers", who are clearly distinct from just players. This positioning continues further:

*Apr 3 #543: when will RPG devs learn that it's us shitlords that buy their games and they should pander to us?*

Interestingly, the implication here is that the video game developers are targeting the wrong audience in the poster's opinion. The poster in question seems to identify with the term "shitlord"<sup>6</sup>, and not only by himself but also as a group. This once again becomes a question of gamer identity - who are the real gamers? By referring to "us shitlords" the poster could be referring to the members of this particular forum, or video game players whom he considers true gamers, thus excluding the opposing group, the social justice warriors, which is implied by assuming the term "shitlord" in performing his own identity.

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6 Shitlord is slang for an internet troll who posts shocking and often bigoted content for the purpose of provoking a reaction, especially from left-leaning social justice advocates. Some shitlords ironically embrace the term." (Dictionary.com 2019).

At this point on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, in the Beamdog official forums many discussions begin to be closed and locked for further discussion because of antagonization. A moderator explained that *“Threads that are being locked are being locked because they devolve into antagonistic remarks about the LGBTQ community or about specific people on this forum. Feel free to discuss the quality of the writing, or the characters themselves, as long as you do so without antagonizing minority groups”*. Later, the same moderator recognized the RPGCodex as intentional antagonizers, locking a discussion with the note: *“This sort of transparent antagonism may be acceptable on RPGCodex, but it's not acceptable here”*, although no one in the thread had explicitly identified as members of RPGCodex. This was also notified in the RPGCodex forum thread, and was interpreted as an act of hostility:

*Apr 3 #569: hehe looks like Beamdog is hostile to the codex. You got to love how the codex always get's blamed for EVERYTHING!.*

A statement from a single moderator is taken to represent the whole game developer company's attitude, and the RPGCodex “always” gets blamed for “everything”. To note, this “codex always get's blamed” might refer to an earlier scenario, when in 2015, a year before the current discussion, RPGCodex was involved in a case where supposedly transmisogynistic content was removed from a video game Pillars of Eternity which caused similar controversy within the forum. The forum members were very vocally against this removal of content.

This poster also takes the stance of the victimized “us”, experiencing that he is under hostility, and the hyperbolic word choices “always” and “everything” contribute to this victimized image. When another poster replies to him by questioning this claimed hostility (post #759), he even explicitly acknowledges the “us and them” rhetorics, further taking the role of a victim. The [username] tag refers to the moderator discussed above.

*Apr 3 #759: Is [username] trying to start a fight with the Codex or advertising the Codex? I don't know [username]'s history, but that line about what is acceptable and where didn't sound too bad to me.*

*Apr 3 #762: It is the same old shit we saw from Bioware. By bringing up the name they are creating a us vs them kind of situation and more or less throwing some blame on the codex and our Tranny hating ways.*

Here the poster refers to an earlier case, and explicitly indicates that there is a “us vs them kind of situation”. Interestingly, he implies that this situation is purposely created by “them” (Beamdog), and that they are the ones throwing the blame on “us” and “our ways”, without recognizing RPGCodex’s part in this antagonizing. Considering earlier examples, it is clear that the same kind of us and them rhetoric is performed by RPGCodex members, as can be seen in post #576 which is a direct reply to post #569:

*Apr 3 #576: No wonder Beamdog does shit like this when the forum is filled with totally enlightened people like that [username]. They think these people are a majority when they're an extremely small minority that happens to be the most vocal out of any group of people on the internet.*

What is noteworthy here is also the mentioning of a majority and minority. Considering the poster’s intention, as per Herring’s scheme, the goal of interaction here seems to be to undermine the opposing side’s authority using negative other-presentation – he sarcastically calls the opposing side “totally enlightened people”, questioning their judgement, and claims that the opposing side, Beamdog’s and SJW’s side, is the “most vocal” but “extremely small minority”, thus illegitimizing their position.

Similar positioning continues, and post #682 also uses the deictic pointer “them” to refer to the game developers. The poster does not use the pronouns “we” or “us”, but instead creates the opposite side of “them” with the pointer “existing fan base”

and “people they [the developers] dont like”. This poster also assumes a similar gamer identity with many of the earlier examples, expressing that they are buying customers, but feel mistreated or ignored by the video game developers, creating a narrative of victimization.

*Apr 3 #682: Come on, didnt devs expected this shitstorm? Of course they were. And if they were expecting this and still gave a middle finger to people they dont like, means they care little about profits from its existing fan base. That base is already small, and at least 1/4 of it consists of Eastern Europeans - poles and post-soviets who are known to be socially conservative. So they are not afraid of alienating them. Were they hoping to gain some casual minority player in?*

Negative other-presentation is used to make the game developers seem hostile to the “existing fan base”, us, while pandering to others, which are labeled as “some casual minority” players, illegitimizing their position. According to the him, at least 25% of the game's fan base consists of Eastern Europeans. Certainly according to RPGCodex's visitor statistics (Alexa 2018), 16.4% of the forum's visitors were from Poland in 2018. Does the poster consider RPGCodex and its members to be representative of the game's fanbase? The poster himself has informed his location to be “Ukraine”, thus also explicitly identifying with this particular group of “Eastern Europeans”. The poster makes quite a few assumptions for which there are no evidence provided, which is a typical way of legitimizing one’s position. Again, this is an example of how the poster uses the victimization narrative to appear as an alienated old fan, claiming that other players who share a different opinion are “casual minority players”, and thus legitimizing the poster as a true gamer.

To conclude this section, some observations can be made from the analyzed excerpts regarding the performance of gamer identity. A majority of posters seemed to be concerned that their gamer identity, or gaming culture, was threatened by the supposed “social justice warriors”. Legitimizing their position as true gamers, they felt that video

game developers were prioritizing those more casual players as their audience, leading to worse video games.

The division between “players” and “gamers” was also notable. Players get labeled as “casual”, “thick” and “SJW”, implying that to perform an authentic gamer identity, one has to be *not* casual, smart, and *not* “SJW”. Interestingly, some posters also used location and age in order to create a more authentic gamer identity.

While this section focused more on performing gamer identity using negative other-presentations and positive self-presentations, the next section will analyze the data from a more ideological perspective.

#### **4.2 Gamer identity, gender and ideological discourse**

This section aims to shed more light on the issue of how gender and social politics are present and represented in the gaming community.

Looking at the statistics of posts per day in the thread, it can be seen that the highest rate of posting was between April 3 and April 7. At around this point, more new people joined the discussion with similar questions to what is seen in post #458. The gaming community was alerted that the game might be propagating a social agenda and include “SJW insanity”, which according to post #458 was “snuck” into the game, as if with the intend of trying to hide some sort of social political messages within the game content.

*Apr 3 #458: I heard they snuck SJW insanity into the game, can anyone confirm?"*

*Apr 3 #462: Some guys are already going fucking haywire on Steam and Reddit because of this tranny bullshit. And they hate Amber Scott because she is allegedly an SJW whoring Feminazi.*

Other discussion forums such as 4chan, Reddit and Steam are also mentioned in post #462, indicating that gamers outside this particular community had also become alarmed

by the situation. Post #462 already uses a more aggressive and hostile tone and lexicon: “fucking haywire”, “tranny bullshit” and “SJW whoring feminazi”. He also frames the game’s writer, Amber Scott, as a target for attack and hate, and indeed later on in the discussion, Amber Scott becomes a flagged target for hate spreading. “Feminazi” is a very ideologically charged word choice, used to refer to radical feminism. Ideologically, the post has features of propaganda, by providing allegations with unknown sources: “she is allegedly an SJW ...” and associating one of the game’s writers with Nazis.

Other posters quickly begin to voice their concerns that this SJW content promoting “being gay or different” is spreading into their media:

*Apr 3 #475: It is everywhere nowadays. Especially in movies when they show a dick in your face every now and then or a sex scene from 2 guys. They want to promote the fact that being gay or different it's cool. No it's not!*

The above post #475 is a reply to the screenshot of the transgender character, as presented in Figure 1 in the previous section. The response takes a very explicit stance against homosexuality and has multiple hyperboles, “everywhere”, and “dick in your face every now and then”. The deictic pointer “they” does not explicitly refer to anyone or any group, which makes it interesting, especially since this particular message takes the context outside video games by mentioning another medium, movies. An assumption could be made that “they” here refers to these “social justice warriors”. Especially since it is not explicitly expressed who “they” refers to, the poster positions himself as the lone wolf, whose position or status is threatened by others.

Indeed, when analyzing the discourse of the earlier #Gamergate movement, Braithwaite (2016: 6) keenly made notice that gamers use the “true gamer” identity as a protective barrier, and pointed out that “for Gamergaters, more diverse and inclusive games can only come at the expense of their own sense of identity.” Similar behavior can be seen here, in a very explicit example of victimization:



*Apr 3 #589: So, in the end, is this worth playing or not?*

*Apr 3 #590: Nah... Amber just raped my childhood.*

Poster #590 considers himself to be a victim of the game's major writer, Amber Scott, and indeed, he seems to feel that even his past memories of the game series have been violated. Also, the poster presents himself as being personally violated by using the deictic pointer "my childhood". The use of violent imagery is notable here, which according to Rogers (2016: 7) along with victimization are signs of drawing on hegemonic masculinity.

Up until this point the vocal majority has clearly opposed the inclusion of the transgender character, but here we see a response by a poster, who strongly disidentifies with the vocal majority:

*Apr 3 #466: I too get very upset when a random NPC that's about as important to anything as the leather codpiece I found on a goblin five levels ago says he or she got a sex change in a world where the magic to do that shit is so common that a belt that changes your gender is sent around as a gag to fuck with people.*

*Oh wait no I don't because I'm not an insane faggot obsessed with internet identity politics.*

The poster uses sarcasm as a rhetoric element, implicating that it is ridiculous for people to get upset about a transgender character in a fictive world, where magic exists to perform a sex change. The belt that the poster is referring to here is a reference to the older Baldur's Gate 2 game, in which a character may find a belt, which changes the characters gender from male to female as he equips it.

The poster's tone is still notably hostile, also using the us and them positioning and calling the other party insane faggots obsessed with internet identity politics. Considering the SIDE model as proposed by Rösner and Krämer (2016: 3), this would support their theory that if the social norm of the discussion board is the use of aggressive

and hostile language, individual posters assume this social identity and begin to behave accordingly.

Although the poster is using distinction to disidentify from people who “got upset” with the transgender character, the usage of negative other-presentation is still similar to the posters who he is disidentifying from. This also leads to ideological polarization. The poster explicitly mentions “internet identity politics”, which creates an ideological context to the post and the discussion as a whole. By emphasizing the negative aspects of the other side using such strong, hyperbolic word choices as “insane”, “faggot” and “obsessed”, as well as the use of sarcasm, the poster is making the opposing side, or moreover the opposing side’s ideology seem ridiculous.

The below post #491 is a direct reply to the previous post #466. The poster disidentifies not only with the previous poster, but also from “their kind”. The poster takes the stance against the imaginary “them”, as seen in many previous examples as well.

*Apr 3 #491: You and your kind need to just keep your weird fetishes to the google search bar. They don't actually add anything to games and only serve to detract from them in 99% of cases.*

*It's like the backer NPCs in PoE. Technically, you don't have to read that horrible shit, but they still detract from the game.*

What is also similar to earlier posts is the fact that the poster expresses concern that the quality of video games is being reduced. In other words, the poster is legitimizing his stance of being against transgenderism, or social justice warriors, by using the claim that they detract from the game. The fact that the poster is not targeting only the previous individual poster, but also all *their kind*, implies the existence of a group, who have “weird fetishes”. Thus, the poster sees the opposing side as an ideological group.

Another poster soon emerges with a similar stance to post #466, distancing himself from the polarized us vs. them discourse and using a calmer tone and rationale:

*Apr 3 #581: I have yet to play this game, but gosh, the fact this is an issue proves the entire bullshit of the SJW agenda.*

*I really couldn't care less about a transgender character in a Baldur's gate game, a gay one in Mass Effect, or whatever. I really don't give a fuck, as long as it's written decently. This character is badly written ? Bah, apparently, she's a minor one. I would have gone and moved to something else without taking so much of a notice. The issue is that there is a pressure group that makes the appearance of such a character appear completely dubious, forced, quota-imposed whereas nobody would have even cared before.*

*Still, the best attitude is to not give a shit. Let it go. Let it die. Don't answer. Just do your thing.*

This poster makes an interesting observation in the second paragraph. He explicitly points out that there is a larger social issue within the context. The tone of this poster is notably calmer than in many of the previous examples, and not hostile, which is seen by some word choices such as using “gosh” instead of an expletive. In fact, the voice is even quite conciliatory, proposing people to not make the thing into an issue and move on, without personally attacking anyone. Notable here is the lack of negative other-presentation and the use of a passive voice – instead of an imaginary, adversary “they” target, the poster uses the form “there is a pressure group”, without identifying it further. The poster also uses positive self-presentation to distinguish himself from “the pressure group”: “I really couldn't care less [...]”, “I really don't give a fuck [...]”, “I would have gone and moved to something else [...]”.

The “pressure group” in question and the time “before” that the poster is referring to could be references to the #Gamergate movement, which brought to the surface a clear “pressure group” who made it their agenda to attack social politics and political correctness in video games and the people who defended them. Before the #Gamergate

controversy, talk of progressivism or social justice was much less common in video game communities, at least according to this researcher's own personal experiences having followed the forum since 2010.

Another person joins the discussion, using a similar tone as poster #581 analyzed previously above:

*Apr 3 #637: People are really freaking out about nothing here to be honest. A faux case of mansplaining, a mediocre joke about all goblins looking alike, and a trans person. [At the end of the post the poster has linked a video clip of a Simpsons television show character uttering the phrase "Oh, won't somebody please think of the children"]*

The poster is downplaying the issue, or even trying to give the impression that there really is no issue. Using the wording "a faux case of", he is implying that the issue is fictitious, similarly to poster #581 who claimed that there exists a pressure group, which actively is seeking to create issues regarding social agenda, even when there are little grounds to do so.

The next post is a reply to the previous post #637:

*Apr 3 #639: "Oh fuck off.. Who knows what other cancerous things are in there. Game has only been out 5 minutes and already Minsc is spouting crap about GamerGate. (Which you conveniently missed in your rant.. so many examples of garbage you can't even list them all.)"*

The imagery of cancer is often used by #Gamergaters when referring to social justice warriors, as mentioned in an article exploring the origins of the term social justice warrior in the Washington Post (2015). Gamergate is also explicitly mentioned here. The line "Minsc is spouting crap about GamerGate" refers to a line in the game, where as a kind of a hidden gag, if the player clicks on the Minsc character's avatar multiple times, he will utter a phrase "Really it's all about ethics in heroic adventuring", referring to a line used

by #Gamergate supporters "Actually it's about ethics in gaming journalism", which became a meme during the #Gamergate controversy.

Notably, the line was later removed from the game, accompanied by apologies from the developer company's CEO: "Minsc has a line which generated controversy. Looking back on the line, we agree with the feedback from our community, it has nothing to do with his character and we will be removing the line." (Beamdog Forums 2016)

Some posters have expressed concern with the game's writing before, including the previously introduced post #581, where the poster mentioned that including a transgender character would be acceptable if it was "written decently". At this point in the discussion, a shift in position can be seen – in the early period of the topic, many posters explicitly express hate towards transgenderism or non-heteronormativity directly, but then the focus of the discussion shifts towards the writing of this content, and many posters express the opinion that transgender content would be acceptable, if it was written competently, which they argue that it was not in this case:

*Apr 3 #741: They could've, you know, hired a competent writer and avoided having to beg on their forums for positive reviews. The tranny is just a symptom of a much larger problem. The tranny herself is not the problem, but the way they included her and the context in which she appears. This can only be rectified by having a competent writer.*

Here the poster questions the competency of the game's writer or writers. Interestingly, Lacrymas claims that the transgender character is not the problem, but the way the character is represented is an issue. The post also refers to a statement of the game developer company Beamdog's CEO, Trent Oster, who wrote on Beamdog's forum that "It appears that having a transgendered cleric and a joke line by Minsc has greatly offended the sensibilities of some people" and asked people who have played the game to leave positive reviews counter-balancing the zero-score reviews left by gamers antagonized by the game's supposed social justice content. Trent Oster later made an

official statement concerning the feedback and criticism the game had received, in which he stated that “In retrospect, it would have been better served if we had introduced a transgender character with more development” (Beamdog Forums 2016).

Other people quickly agree that a transgender character in the video game would not be a problem itself, if it was not represented and written as intrusively and jarringly. What is interesting here is that this new position gives the earlier posters who directly and aggressively opposed transgenderism new legitimacy, as they can now argue that the transgender character itself was not the problem, but the way it was represented:

*Apr 4 #813: NO ONE IS FUCKING PISSED ABOUT THERE BEING A TRANNY. People are pissed because it's basically a wikidump about diversity. You can't even tell her / him to fuck of weirdo we don't tolerate the likes of you around here, like you can say to pretty much every other npc in the game. No no that would be oppressing and counter intuitive against the writer's agenda.*

In post #813, the poster claims that the inclusion of a transgender character did not make gamers upset, but its representation: “a wikidump about diversity”. The term wikidump is often used to describe a piece of dialogue in a video game which seems out of context for the game and reads more like a wikipedia article, not fitting in with the game’s narrative or writing.

However, as it can be seen from the earlier examples in the data, many posters express hatred towards the inclusion of a transgender character itself and transgenderism in general and not just its representation. Using the deictic pointers “no one” and “people”, the poster is assuming the position of speaking on the whole community’s behalf. Also, the poster has written the first sentence with capital letters, emphasizing its aggressive tone, also showing in word choices such as “FUCKING PISSED”.

Some posters even go as far as to give examples of what would be an acceptable representation of a transgender character in a game. These examples seem to reflect the idea that the gamer identity and community is strongly rooted in heteronormativity:

*Apr 4 #814: The best part of this silly debacle is that if a 'transgender' character were introduced as this cute (or strong, muscled, domineering) dickgirl harlot, people would love it. Internet loves their dickgirls.*

Post #814 introduces a view that an acceptable representation of a transgender character would be a 'dickgirl harlot', supporting the view that overly sexualized representations of genders are received more favorably in the heteronormative gaming community. This view is further shared with other posters, such as post #862: "[...] if they did trans right, nobody would care.. lots of weebos love their dick gurlz."

One poster also expresses disdain with the game's writing, noting "Instead of immersing myself in the Sword Coast, I have to deal with 21st centure[sic] identity politics". The poster goes as far as to propose a short fan fiction story of the player finding two male hunters living in a cabin and sharing a bed, and further noting that as long as the player was not explicitly told by the game characters about their sexuality, it would be acceptable. These representations of what an acceptable transgender character could be like offer an interesting view on gamers' reaction to gender.

As the discussion is now at its most active period (574 posts posted on April 4<sup>th</sup>, in contrast to only 247 posts on the following day), many new participants who have previously been inactive join the discussion, and a new paradigm shift in the discussion occurs. Some posters emerge who refuse to take any side in the us vs. them deployment, and express frustration with both sides. Interestingly, they use other indices to deploy their identity:

*Apr 3 #561: The 'LGBTQ community', Christ. I'm bisexual and therefore part of this 'community'. Douchebags like that mod make me fucking sick! #KILLALLFAGGOTSNOW!*

*Apr 4 #894: I am a feminist (I think that women are treated worse than men all over the world. Even in the western world, they're less paid than men for the same amount of work). In my work, I collaborate with a lot of gays and bisexuals (I'm a musician). And you know what Beamdog?*

*They told me to say to you that shoving this fucked-up SJW shitty agenda in a video game is propaganda that bores them. They're not all white or black for heaven's sake. They don't give a fuck about gender. There are evil trannies, gays, lesbians or heterosexuals in life, can you imagine that?*

*Amber's diatribe in Kotaku is just puritan.*

Both posters use a similar tactic of ideological discourse here. They explicitly identify with a specific group: "I'm bisexual", "I am a feminist", thus legitimizing their position to speak on behalf of that particular community. The first poster refers to a moderator in Beamdog forums, who accused RPGCodex of purportedly antagonising the LGBTQ community.

Poster #894 further assumes an interesting stance – in addition to explicitly identifying as a feminist and a musician, the poster takes the role of a herald for the entire LGBTQ community. The us and them division gets transitioned – "them" actually become "us", and Beamdog is addressed as a single entity, "you", who have a "fucked-up SJW shitty agenda". Instead of there being an ideological group of social justice warriors who are trying to inflict video games with their political agenda, the fault is now solely Beamdog's. Considering the goal of interaction here, it could be said that the poster is attempting to shift the target of hate away from the LGBTQ community, and towards the game developers, who have previously been associated with the LGBTQ community, but are now severed from such association. The discourse becomes ideological, and it is not clear anymore who is 'us' and who is 'them'.



The overall tone of frustration continues, and more posters using distinction to distance themselves from the us vs. them division appear:

*Apr 4 #1182: I'm so conflicted. I can't make up my mind. Who do I hate more, SJW or faggot nerds that need to leave there parents basement so they can do something other than launching an online crusade over a goddamn video games. Fuck this shit, this is why western society is going down the drain.*

*Do your job, beat up a faggot in real life.*

Poster #1182 clearly disidentifies from the “SJW” side as well as the opposition. However, the tone of the poster is not conciliatory; instead he urges others to “beat up a faggot in real life” while claiming that the “western society is going down the drain”. Even though the poster refuses to take a stance, other posters intercept him:

*Apr 4 #1190: "online crusade"? You mean like posting comments in the RPGCodex...which people do every day? I hardly call that a crusade. Where's the killing? Where's the pillaging and plundering? Those were the real crusades. Not the ones you kids call "crusades" nowadays. This is why western society is going down the drain.*

*\*grumpyoldman.jpg\**

*Apr 4 #1191: That's my point [username], it's an online crusade, it's fucking ridiculous. As ridiculous as making a point by putting a tranny in a goddamn video game.*

*Apr 4 #1194: Except one side takes their opinions very seriously and the other side is laughing as Rome burns.*

*You just want to be a fence sitting edge lord and nobody is feeding into your delusions.*

Poster #1191 identifies the polarized sides in the us vs. them discourse, but refuses to take part on either side. Instead, he calls both sides equally ridiculous. However, poster #1194

accuses poster #1191 of being a “fence sitting edge lord<sup>7</sup>”. This creates an interesting situation ideologically. One is forced to taking a side, and there are only two sides. If you are not a part of “us”, you are a part of “them”, and are denied authority: “nobody is feeding into your delusions”.

Other posters who share the frustration and refuse to take sides appear shortly after:

*Apr 5 #1398: This whole mess is disgusting, all of it, both sides. All of you people make me fucking sick. It's a shame that this legendary game will now most likely be forever linked to some retarded "culture wars" bullshit that was inflated to ridiculous proportions thanks to the internet. Nothing is good anymore, everything is poisoned. Small and insignificant as it may be, it's just another thing on the pile of reasons of why I should move to a cabin in the mountains or join some monastery in the east. More noise from a troubled world.*

*Apr 4 #1201: We have finally arrived at the point where morons are accusing other people of being "edgy" because they don't support their ridiculous crusade against a minor badly written character (and knowing Beamdog that won't be the only badly written character) in what is apparently a 40-hour game. But of course none of them have actually played this thing so it's not like they can complain about anything else.*

*The ani-LGTB[sic] sentiments on the codex always seemed to be in good fun but lately it seems like it has been taken over by a vocal minority of idiots who take crusading against anything even slightly gay as serious as the SJW's flauning[sic] around their agenda at every possible moment. Is this place filled with conservative Russians trying to shove their old skool "values" down our collective throates[sic] or what? Or are this just basement dwelling nerds who are really this bored and cantankerous?*

*Beamdog handling this very badly doesn't help either of course but I came here to read some impressions and nearly all I see is bitches whining about what is a minor issue and hijacking this thing with an obvious political agenda.*

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7 “An edgelord is someone on an internet forum who deliberately talks about controversial, offensive, taboo, or nihilistic subjects in order to shock other users in an effort to appear cool, or edgy.” (Dictionary.com 2019)

Both the “us” and “them” sides are now ridiculed, and more posters begin to distinguish themselves from the forum’s collective identity. Both posters imply that something has recently happened, which has culminated into these “culture wars”: “Nothing is good anymore [...]” and “The anti-LGTB[sic] sentiments on the codex always seemed to be in good fun but lately [...]”. This would suggest that something in the gaming discourse has changed, which also supports this research’s hypothesis that in the recent years, video gaming discourse has become more polarized and aggressive, leading to ideological polarization and the us vs. them situation, where one has to choose a side.

Interestingly, poster #1201 uses adequation to identify with “the codex” at first, deeming that he has been entertained by “the anti-LGTB sentiments” before, but it has become too much, and he now wants to distinguish himself from the “vocal minority of idiots”.

There being a war between the “us” and “them” sides has also been mentioned by others, and the discourse of war in general is present within the discussion: social justice *warriors*, *propaganda* and online *crusade*. As these online discussions also reflect the social reality around the world outside the online and gaming context, and as this study proposes that online behavior and identity performance may also affect behavior and identity play in real world, this is concerning and more interdisciplinary research into this subject would certainly provide more answers.

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the discourse of an online gaming community, and to investigate in more detail how gamer identity is performed in the discourse. The target of this study was a role-playing game oriented online forum RPGCodex, of which the researcher has been a reader for a number of years. This brought some advantages in terms of ethnographical knowledge about the forum's culture and norms, and this also inspired the researcher in choosing this topic and formulating the research questions.

The data was gathered from a single forum thread centered around the release of a video game *Baldur's Gate: Siege of Dragonspear*, which was an expansion to the original *Baldur's Gate*, a highly acclaimed role-playing game released in 1998. The release of this game caused online controversy similar to earlier #Gamergate controversy, which was an online movement centered on issues of sexism and progressivism in video game communities. This subject provided grounds for deeper discourse analysis relating gamer identities in an online community.

The study attempted to provide an answer to two research questions. The first part of the analysis examined what kind of strategies were used to perform gamer identity in the forum discussions, while the second part examined the data on the level of ideological discourse, and examined the relationship of gamer identities and other identities, such as gender or sex.

The analysis showed that the discourse surrounding gamer identity is notably polarized. This polarization is most salient through the "us" vs. "them" positioning, which manifests through positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. The study also examined how gamer identity is negotiated via authentication and (de-)legitimization. *Players* were often explicitly separated from *gamers*, or the members of the forum explicitly disidentified themselves from "the players". The *players* were

described as casual, stupid (“thick”, “retarded”), implying that in order to be an authentic gamer, one must have considerable experience and time investment in the game(s).

Interestingly, the analysis also found a third group between the vocal “us” and “them” groups. This group refused to identify with either side in the discourse, and often called them both out explicitly, expressing frustration and anger at both sides equally. The common tone with this group of posters was of frustration, with one poster (#1182) noting: *“Fuck this shit, this is why western society is going down the drain.”* What was also interesting to notice was the fact that the rest of the community would react to this inbetween group, forcing them to take a side. One has to be either for or against, or be called a “fence sitting edge lord” and have one’s authority delegitimized.

The majority of the posters also seemed to be explicitly against “social justice warriors” (SJW) and SJW content in their video games and other media. Legitimizing their position as true gamers, they felt that video game developers were prioritizing those more casual players as their audience, leading to worse video games. This legitimization often happened by using factors such as age or experience to establish oneself as an old fan who has had a long time commitment with the video game in question.

The question of gamer identity has recently become a popular subject in many academic fields, and many studies support the results of this analysis. In a recent study, Vermeulen et al. (2016: 10) analyzed masculine gamer identity strategies and noted “the ongoing feminization of players and products has led to a perceived gamer status threat among traditional male players, which is counteracted by means of novel forms of backlash or identity management strategies.” Among such strategies Vermeulen et al. (2016: 1) identified “the use of hostile sexist assaults to silence feminist gamers and advocates”, a strategy which was also notable in the data of this analysis, for example calling one of the game’s writers a “feminazi”.

This brings the video games, and by relation the gamer identity discourse, to an ideological level and to a wider context outside the video gaming communities. The identities performed also get disrupted and affected by this polarization, which leads to aggressive language and behavior, and the need to legitimize one's position via negative other-presentation. And as can be seen from the analysis, even the ones who try to stay in-between get affected by this aggressive behavior, and thus their language and tone also easily becomes frustrated, aggressive and hostile, even if they try to maintain a neutral position. Concerning one's identity deployment outside the online (and gaming) context, it is possible to argue that this polarized identity play online may affect one's identity performance in other contexts as well.

One way to look at the results of this analysis is to consider the social and political situation around the world at the time the actual discussion happened, in April 2016. Notably, the campaign for the 2016 United States presidential election was taking place, and it was also very visible within the RPGCodex forum - those posters who explicitly identified as not supporting Donald Trump had prison bars stuck on top of their posts and received an achievement which declared "It's on the other side of the wall for you!" In addition, many posters in the forum openly expressed far right minded opinions, as well as hatred towards transgenderism. The alternative right, or alt-right movement was emerging during this time as well, and anyone who expressed opinions they deemed leftist, were labeled "Social Justice Warriors" (SJWs), a term frequently seen in the discussions in this analysis as well.

Thus, it seems evident that the identity play and the strong polarization is also a reflection of the social phenomena in the outside world, which gives more importance for this kind of research. Curiously, it has been studied far less how this online identity play and discourse affects behavior and identity development outside the online context. The strong polarization may lead to strongly polarized opinions and identities in the real world as well.

A recent study conducted in the University of Oxford by Przybylski and Weinstein (2019) explored the relationship between violent video games and adolescents' aggressive behavior. It has long been a popular belief that there is a link between these factors, and this study was one of the most definitive studies on the issue to date. Surprisingly, and against the study's hypothesis, there was no evidence of such correlation. The study used information from parents and carers instead of self-reported data from the adolescents, and the researchers also used techniques to avoid pre-biasing, which has been a subject of criticism in similar, previous studies. Interestingly, the researchers were concerned with antisocial behavior in video gaming communities, and suggested that more research should be conducted studying the discourse in these communities, for they may have implications in adolescents' increased violent behavior.

Considering the applications of this study and further research, it would seem very possible that online behavior has implications to behavior outside the online context, and similarly online identity play and development may affect one's identity development and conception in the outside world as well. These are very important matters to study further, and also relevant to many interdisciplinary research fields in addition to linguistics, such as social psychology, sociology and communications. Even in linguistics, there are numerous different types of approaches that can be used, and analyzing the same data using different methods will always provide different results. The nature of (critical) discourse analysis is also that it is very interpretative, and thus different analysts will get different results.

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