

**We Are Many:**

Constructing identities in an Online Community of a Video Game

Shi “Rafael” Qianlu  
Master’s Thesis in Intercultural communication  
Department of Language and Communication Studies  
University of Jyväskylä  
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<p>Tiivistelmä – Abstract</p> <p>Video game production is more than a successful entertainment industry. With games as vessels, many stories have been told and experienced differently. Like many other forms of human-computer interaction, games are partly designed to break the need for other participants, however, a player still feels the need to remain in contact with other players, and thus, communities of single-player games are built. This study uses Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) as a framework, explores the identity gaps and identity guided behaviors in an online forum discussing lore of The Witcher game franchises.</p> <p>During a qualitative content analysis, over 80 forum threads and more than 5000 posts and replies were analyzed. Findings showed that in The Witcher 3 forum, CTI as a multi-layered framework still applies in general. However, the result also presented the need for group-based layering in future CTI development. Furthermore, through this study, I attempt to explore a new way to study and observe CTI propositions. Focusing on communication environments instead of looking into specific identity gaps may be able to help scholars to further analyze possible forms of interaction between different layers of identity.</p>	
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## 1. Introduction

Video game production is more than a successful entertainment industry. With games as vessels, many stories have been told and experienced differently. Individuals can grow habits of playing video games. Like all the other art forms, video games helped to build connections among those who share their interests in games. Like many other forms of human-computer interaction, games are partly designed to break the need for other participants, however, a player still feels the need to remain in contact with other players, and thus, communities of single-player games are built.

Communication Theory of Identity was originally inspired and studied through face-to-face communication. As a response to the calling of Hecht et al. (2005) on applying CTI in CMC, some studies have applied CTI in online environments. This study aims to add another piece in this area by observing and analyzing the roles of CTI Propositions in an online forum environment.

Hecht and his colleagues have been studying specific identity gaps. In this study, however, instead of attempt to study the gap between two specific identities, I would like to search for potential behaviors guided by potential identity gaps in a sub-cultural community, i.e. instead of focus on specific identity gap, this study looks into a specific communication environment, where multiple layers may appear at the same time.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment, on the other hand, may as well proven to be a suitable field to study identity. For example, while Hecht and his colleagues rely mainly on questionnaires to gather data so that they could receive

more insight on people's self-conception, I may be able to receive some information about self-conception directly from visible patterns during communication.

In this study, I choose the official forum of The Witcher franchise as my target field. Not only because The Witcher franchise is among the best role-playing games during the past decade, but also because of The Witcher franchise as given the players many moral, intelligent and romance choices in the gameplay and several alternative endings. I expect to see the dynamic of identities become visible during such discussions in the forum.

Besides, I believe Hecht would be happy to see an application of CTI on fandom-related studies. After all, Hecht (1993) initiated his proposal under the title "*2002-A Research Odyssey*", after the 1968 movie, *2001 a space odyssey*. It suggested that Hecht use to be among the fanboys of the epic sci-fi movie.

I will start with the theoretical background of Communication Theory of Identity as Computer-mediated Communication as well as some general background of fandom and gaming cultures in the following two chapters. The research method would be explained in Chapter 4, as well as the case, The Witcher 3 Forum. In Chapter 5 I will present my key finding and discuss my conclusions in Chapter 6.

## **2. Theory review**

This study analyzes how identities may be formed, enhanced, and demonstrated in online forums. This study utilizes Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) in an open online forum discussing a narrative single-player video game.

CTI was originally created to study individuals' identities in multiple combined disciplines and categories. The idea that initiates this study is to study how different identities of people switch in an online forum. I assume that while the users of the forum try to establish their online identities, multiple layers of their identities may be demonstrated, some may be related to their offline identities.

### **2.1. Communication Theory of Identity (CTI)**

#### **2.1.1. Origin**

Before Hecht's (1993) proposal of CTI, one of the most popular theories about identity that is widely applied is Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT (Tajfel, 1974, Tajfel & Turner, 1986, etc.) suggested that the social group a person belongs to would affect the person's self-identification and behaves accordingly during communication (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, cited in Tajfel & Turner 1986). However, one can argue that a person's social group is comparatively stable, while the behavior may differ or change due to many reasons.

Communication Theory of Identity was proposed by Hecht (1993). The theory is influenced by empirical studies related to identity. Hecht (1993) asserted that the empirical viewpoints on identity were often based on paradoxical thought, while he argued that dialectic thought might be more useful in this type of research and that

three or more 'realms' may be put into consideration. Hecht (1993) view identity as a situational element, each 'realm' represents a specific environment, where identity can be learned situationally. On the other hand, the 'realms' are not isolated from one another. The purpose of proposing CTI was to extend the studies of identity by integrating communication, and by doing so, guide identity studies in the area of communication (Hecht, 1993, Hecht et al., 2005).

Hecht et al. (1993) connected identity with communication in two ways. The first way is internalizing symbolic meanings of social phenomena as identity such as when an individual forms symbolic meaning and connects these meanings to their selves, identity is created and exchanged through social interactions. During social interactions in different situations, symbolic meanings are organized and attached to individuals. Identity is formed in this process. The second way is internalizing identity by attaching oneself to a socially recognizable category. When people connect themselves with categories, they form and reform their identity by confirming whether they want to be placed in certain categories during social interactions. Besides, people may demonstrate their identity by behaving as expected for certain categories during social interactions. Therefore, identities are not stationary but dynamic, not singular but multi-sided. Individual's identities may not always be corresponded to each other. One side of a person's identity may even seem to be contradictive to another side of the same person's identity.

As Hecht (1993) stressed in his proposition of the theory, A key contribution of CTI is "the layering of theory and methods." Hecht (1993, p.1) explored different



areas of studies and combined viewpoints from different “realms”. The area of identity is related to psychological, sociological, and anthropological perspectives.

Each perspective focuses on different elements of identity, such as individual, role, social, and communal (Hecht, 1993). Instead of viewing identity as a simple feature, CTI argues that identity has different layers and flows with contexts. All the layers of identity exist at the same time, however, at a certain time period, only some are visible or effective.

Four layers had been proposed by Hecht (1993), they are personal, enacted, relational, and communal identity. Personal identity answers the question “who I am”. It is an individual’s self-concept, self-image, or self-esteem. Enacted identity is about the question “how I behave”. The enacted is generated and maintained during communication and interaction. Relational identity is emerged out of relationships, it shows one’s role to others, i.e. “who I am to others”. Individuals usually hold many roles in society and the active role shifts with environment and communication. Communal identity is shared in a group of people by defining “who we are” (Hecht 1993, Hecht et al. 2005, Shin & Hecht, 2017).

Hecht (1993) has argued that there are interpenetrations of frames. Identity frames should not be seen as isolated factors from each other. It is possible that they could be visible and identified two, three, or all four at a time.

Back in 1993, Hecht had seen the need for a communication-based theory for identity. Rapidly borrowing terms of identity from other principles had been proven inaccurate and inefficient since each principle provides certain contexts while

situations of communication may be different and rapidly shifting. Thus, Hecht had provided a brand-new pass to understand identity in a dynamic way. At that moment, Hecht's proposal was mainly based on his own observation and assumptions. He titled his -proposal paper as "2002-A Research Odyssey", after the 1968 epic sci-fi movie *2001 a space odyssey*. The title seems to have suggested that Hecht's attitude on this proposal: it would be a long journey and it could be game-changing.

### **2.1.2. Key assumptions of CTI**

Hecht (1993) hoped that the new perspective he proposed could become an efficient tool for identity-related communication studies and he knew that the construction and perfection of the framework would take a big amount of time and work. In the next decade, Hecht devoted himself in the journey alongside with some of his students and colleagues. After several collaborated studies were published, Hecht et al. (2005) made some further adjustments and proposed some new directions on the theory based on their findings during those years.

First of all, Hecht et al. (2005) suggested that it is important to further explore the negotiation processes that are raised in CTI. Jackson (2002a, 2002b) developed cultural contracts theory (CCT). Hecht and his colleagues consider Jackson's work on CCT fills in some negotiated identity gaps between CTI layers in relational communication. CCT (Jackson 2002a, 2002b) argues that the negotiation of cultural identity is a contractual process during relational communications. These cultural contracts are formed during interaction and become a part of identity. In addition, Jackson (2002b) proposed three types of cultural contracts: Ready-to-sign contracts,

quasi-completed contracts, and co-created contracts. Ready-to-sign contracts are the coordination of relationships founded upon assimilation. These cultural contracts are pre-negotiated and at the given point of time, there is no possibility of further negotiation. Quasi-completed contracts are those processes of adaptation. These contracts are at the given point of time pre-negotiated and the individual is not ready to completely accept the value of the other party, yet the individual behaves according to the contract. Co-created contracts are those mutually valued and fully negotiable by all relevant parties.

The original version of CTI has already brought out the four layers (or *frames* in Hecht et al., 2005) is related to each other in a way of interpenetration. However, it did not describe any specific type of interpenetration. Hecht et al. (2005) emphasized that discrepancy or contradiction between different layers of identity is a possible way of interpenetration. Jung (2003, cited in Hecht et al., 2005) and Jung (2004) defined this type of interpenetration as “identity gap”. One example of identity gap is given in Maeda and Hecht’s (2012) study. This study suggested that many Japanese women consider “always-single status” as their personal identities. They are not planning to get married at least in the foreseeable future. However, as such a plan for being single forever is hard to be accepted in many traditional Japanese families, thus, relational identity as a functional family member and always-single personal identity shows an identity gap.

Based on the association and interpenetration among four layers of identity, Hecht et al. (2005) reorganized and summarized 18 “testable/observable” propositions

of CTI. The propositions are as follow:

*Basic Propositions:*

- *Identities have individual, social, and communal properties.*
- *Identities are both enduring and changing.*
- *Identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual.*
- *Identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation.*
- *Identities involve both subjective and ascribed meaning.*
- *Identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and define membership in communities.*
- *Identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols, meanings, and labels.*
- *Identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication.*
- *Identities are a source of expectations and motivations.*
- *Identities are emergent.*

*The proposition for the personal layer is:*

- *Identities are hierarchically ordered meanings attributed to self as an object in a social situation*

*The proposition for the enactment layer is:*

- *Identities are enacted in social behavior and symbols.*

*Propositions for the relational layer are:*

- *Identities emerge in relationship to other people.*
- *Identities are enacted in relationships.*

- *Relationships develop identities as social entities.*
- *Identities are meanings ascribed to the self by others in the social world.*
- *Identities are hierarchically ordered social roles.*

*The proposition for the communal layer is:*

- *Identities emerge out of groups and networks.*

Up to 2005, CTI had been modified over the previous years with most of its signature proposals remained. Besides, in Hecht's (1993) original proposal, he merely brought up his assumptions, and in 2005, Hecht and his colleagues had been tested those proposals over the years and made adjustments based on results from multiple studies. Therefore, Hecht et al. (2005) considered their framework comparatively complete. Instead of "assumptions" as they were given in Hecht's (1993) paper, they had been brought up as propositions. As a multilayered framework, studies have been applying CTI in multiple groups. It is expected new applications in different areas would bring new blood to CTI (Hecht et al., 2005, Shin & Hecht, 2017).

### **2.1.3. Previous Application and future direction**

CTI is originally brought out from and for the field of ethnicity, which is one of the earliest and most applied fields of CTI. According to Hecht et al. (2005), a lot of studies on identity are related to two approaches: ethnic labeling and ethnic salience.

In 2012, Hecht joint forces with Maeda to study identity of always-single women in Japan. In Maeda and Hecht's (2012) study, independent women were studied in Japanese national culture, which, according to Maeda and Hecht, tend to connect single women with negative impressions. In another study about LGBTQ identity and

Jewish identity, Hecht worked with Faulkner (2010). According to their work, as LGBTQ is commonly considered unorthodox among Jewish, quite often were LGBTQ individuals forced to choose between Jew identity and LGBTQ identity. These studies mainly focus on the conflict between individuals' ethnic identity and other identities. Many other similar studies focus on identity gaps among certain groups have been conducted by Hecht and his colleagues (Warren et al., 2010, Matsunaga et al., 2010, etc.).

Hecht et al. (2005) called for CTI based studies in the field of healthcare. In addition to traditional contexts of identity (race, ethnic, and gender), studies about identity-related to health status. In particular, Hecht et al. (2005) proposed that long-term illness might be considered as a suitable area of research based on CTI. To answer this calling, Hecht himself also participated in several physical and mental health-related studies.

It has been studied by many scholars that individuals' identities may help to build their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, identities have affected people's health choices, values, and actions (Hecht & Choi, 2012). Hecht and Lu (2014) suggest that identity studies can help to build a framework, to enhance health interventions by tailing health message design.

An example of Hecht's study with his colleagues can be found in his joint work with Jung (Hecht & Jung, 2008). The health issue Hecht and Jung (2008) specifically addressed is depression among Korean immigrants in the United States. Their study concluded that identity gaps formed in communication increase the risk of

depression.

One doubt I have on CTI studies is that all the above-mentioned studies are assumption driven. Hecht benefits from his colleagues by collaborating CTI with topics that his co-workers are familiar with. The assumptions must have been determined before Hecht decided with whom he would work. Hecht and Jung (2008) acknowledged that in their study, the samples are hardly random but deliberately selected and it was considered as a limitation. Hecht and Sandra Faulkner (2010) intended to study Jewish simply as an ethnic group and assumed Jewish identity and LGBTQ identity may create identity gaps. However, some of their results have shown the possibility for an individual to separate the Jewish religion from Jewish parentage, i.e. individual may self-identified as a Jewish because of his or her Jewish parentage while Jewish religion may not have significant influence over him or her. Since nowadays many Jewish communities do not tightly bind their bloodline with religion anymore, LGBTQ identity does not necessarily have vital gaps with Jewish identity.

Shin & Hecht (2017) also pointed out that as previous studies focus mainly on identity gaps, more studies should be developed to bring CTI into intercultural communication. In this study, I propose to apply and test CTI in a specific communication environment and see how each layer of identities appears.

In Hecht et al. (2005), computer-mediated communication is also targeted as a possible ground where CTI may be applied. In Shin & Hecht (2017), it has been reported that with the development of information technology, new media has magnified the identity layer. It has also been suggested that further development of

CTI may be required to adapt into the growing information technology. Bailey's (2019) bachelor's thesis has shown the potential of CTI application in online environment. Bailey (2019) uses raw data from Instagram, explores, and tests Hecht (1993) and Jung & Hecht's (2004) propositions on the identity construction of Instagramers.

## **2.2. Computer-mediated communication**

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) refers to *"a process of human communication via computers, involving people, situated in a particular context, engaging in processes to shape media for variety of purposes"* (December, 1997, para.4). Theories related to CMC have been proposed. Many agreed that the channels of communication shape the behaviors of the communicators in every possible context (e.g. Lea & Spears, 1992, Donath, 1999, 2007, Walther et al., 2015).

As McLuhan & Fiore (1967, p.8) states *"Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication."* Social presence theory (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976) stated that experience of communication is highly related with the quality of the medium, because different medium provides a different level of physical engagement, and feeling of the existence of another party. According to Short, Williams & Christie (1976), face-to-face communication was considered to have the highest level of social presence.

While in CMC, lack of high level of social presence may change communication behaviors in multiple ways. As many different communication forms



may be considered as CMC, the effect on communication may as well differs due to the specific tool that is being used. In many prevalent types of CMC, such as an online forum, auditory and visual channels are not activated, thus some key information may not be able to be delivered due to lack of tones and body language etc. The response time may be increased due to many reasons. For example, a long text message can only be received after the message is fully input and sent, while in oral communication message sending and receiving may proceed at the same time. Signal lagging may as well reduce the immediacy in CMC. Without physical contact, participants of communication are possible to remain anonymous and hidden.

Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal model of CMC proposed a four-dimension framework of CMC. The dimensions are sender, receiver, channel, and feedback. In receivers' level, when certain information is expected but missing, a receiver may tend to fill in the blanks and further affect how the original information is perceived and processed. In senders' level, lack of certain physical contact, online users can hide or alter physical, environmental, or other undesirable behaviors in order to create preferred receiver perceptions. In the channel's level, it is suggested that the characteristics of the channel could shape the message construction behaviors. In the feedback level, a feedback system would be created during the interaction. While the receiver shows an expectation for the sender's personality, the sender may further construct the messages according to the feedback.

While information technologies have helped to break the limitation of time and space in communication, lack of social presence has been proven risky in certain

circumstances. Message feedback is also significantly reduced and, in the meantime, the level of uncertainty and the possibility of misunderstandings are increased. Some studies have shown a tendency of misuse of online communication in aggressor, stalking, and bullying. Short et al. (1976) stated that lack of feedback from the recipients may facilitate problematic behaviors, such as disinhibition, flaming, etc. Bubaš's (2001) study shows a tendency of misuse of online communication in aggressor, stalking, and bullying.

Current CTI studies focus mainly on specific social groups while I consider communication environment is also a factor that to be considered in future CTI studies. has not been commonly considered. CMC characteristics may help to point a direction on how communication environment affects the construction, negotiation, and dynamic of an individual's identity.

Constructing identity has two dimensions, one is how individuals demonstrate the self-image, the other is how others perceive one's identity. Wright (2017) states that while many previous identity construction theories still stand in digital worlds, new portions have been brought into consideration by the development of communication technologies. For example, a/s/l (age, sex, and location) is used as a simple method of exchanging personal identity. In text-based chatrooms, I could present my basic information as "29/M/FIN" to identify myself as a 29-years old male located in Finland. The information provided with a/s/l is based on one's offline identity, which many still consider matters.

On the other hand, Wright (2017) also acknowledged that the digital world

changed the traditional methods of identification. In the digital world, I am given more freedom to hide my offline identity and/or appear to a completely different person. Besides, due to different characteristics of the communication channel, different possible methods, such as nickname, avatar, and personal website, can be applied to construct one's online identity.

### **3. Fandom and digital game culture**

#### **3.1. Why become a fan?**

In Wann's (1995) Sport Fan Motivation Scale (SFMS), eight factors of sport fan motivation were summarized and considered: Eustress, self-esteem, escape, entertainment, economic, aesthetic, group affiliation, and family. Although SFMS was based on sport fans and, considering the technological background in the 1990s, spectators, some recent studies (Chadborn, Edwards & Reyson, 2017) on non-sport fans still use SFMS as a guideline.

Wanns (1995) data were collected among sport fans and in an age that television and physical spectating in, for example, stadium, may be the main platform of fandom practice. Therefore, some of the factor may be less or not relevant to my topic.

In Wann (1995), Eustress and self-esteem are considered as two of the most notable motivations for sport fans. Fans follow games because they may enjoy the tension of competitions or the feeling of accomplishment from victories of their team. However, eustress and self-esteem as motivation does not necessarily fit into some other form of fandom. Although I would prefer to exclude these two factors in this research, it is important to bear in mind that they are based on competition and are not exclusive in sport. Besides, Wann (1995) also noted that self-esteem may enhance sport fandom independently as a feel of identification and belonging without specific team success. In this sense, self-esteem could be more related to this study.

Another factor in Wanns (1995) scale showed the economical motivation of

fans. It is said to be aroused by potential economic gains through wagering. However, one should be noted that in modern days there are other possible ways to gain economic benefits through fandom activities than wagering. For example, cos-playing, fan-art, and online streaming. Wann (1995) indicated that those who pursue economic benefit could gain entertainment in the process as well.

Other possible motivations Wann (1995) mentioned may be comparatively more significant in this study. According to Wann (1995), the desire to find an escape from everyday life is also a possible motivation of fans. This motivation may be more obvious in the current years when online platforms and digital technologies are widely applied by fans. Wann (1995) also mentioned entertainment as the motivation of fans. This may seem like an obvious factor, however, Wann (1995) specifically explained that for some people practice fandom is better than actually doing sports because few if any special skills are required. This explanation may also apply for some areas other than sports, such as video games.

Fans may be motivated by affiliation needs. For some people, maintaining contact with a group and feeling like a part of it is the primary reason for them to practice fandom (Wann, 1995). This factor may even be easier to examine in online forums as the history of communication may as well be traced. Wann (1995) also considered family ties as motivation. Watching and discussing sports can be family activities and could enhance family bonds. However, in this study, I focus on online environment, where family relations may not be easy to perceive. Whether it is significant to this study is yet to be examined.

As Reysen and Branscombe (2010) pointed out, many previous studies focused only on sport fans. However, their study (Reysen & Branscombe, 2010) has also concluded that in sense of group identification, sport fans and non-sport fans may not be very different.

### **3.2. Participatory fandom**

In Fleming (2007, p.2), participatory fan is defined as individuals that “do more than just enjoy watching their favorite shows or reading their favorite authors” and “go a step further, by engaging in activities related to the object of their affection, as well as seeking interaction with each other in organized group activities”. By this definition, the participants of online discussions on a fandom subject can be considered as participatory fans.

According to Jenkins (2006A), the term participatory culture was created in contrast with older concept of passive media spectatorship. Participatory fans engage with media, fandom objectives, as well as each other. In this sense, the influence of media and fandom objectives are not one-sided, instead, fans in general hold great power over the public agenda of cultural communities, of which the original writers and creators are also a part.

Grossberg (1992) suggested that fandom is being practiced in a “constructed and changing” place within popular culture. Fans may potentially affect the ideology of the fan culture. Therefore, Grossberg (1992) perceived fandom as a political activity within fan groups. Similar to real-world democratic politics, it involves public opinion and interests. In this sense, a fan may feel him- or herself being empowered

and wish to make a difference within the popular culture.

It is also important for readers to understand that “Haters are fans”, as it is said a lot among fandom groups. If someone cares enough to actively express hatred specifically toward a sub-cultural subject, and potentially affect the public agenda within the fan group, then he/she should be considered as a participatory fan by the definition given above.

“Transmedia” is a concept brought out by Jenkins (2006A). As a comparatively new concept, defining transmedia with limited words may have been proven difficult. The word itself contains rich meanings. Jenkins (2006A) used the term to describe that a single story being told in multiple media platforms. In this study, I mainly focus on transmedia from the audiences’ side instead of writers’. Therefore, a suitable definition can be found in Herrmann et al.’s (2018, para.1) study. Herrmann et al. define transmedia as “the best possible way a single story can be understood and followed across different types of media.” This definition suits this study better since it emphasizes how stories are “understood and followed” instead of presented.

Transmedia narrative may have given more power to fans. In an online article, Lubbas (n.d.) has provided an excellent example for fans using social media as channel, challenging authors’ authorities of narratives. When the author of Harry Potter series, J.K. Rowling extend Harry Potter universe by using Twitter as a channel to continue the storytelling, she opened a bi-way channel for fans to reach her. At that moment, even Roland Barthes (1968) might consider the author “dead”, Rowling

continues to hold great power over the story of Harry Potter. According to Lubbas (n.d.), Rowling has provided some information that did not appear in the original books, such as people have been pronounced Lord Voldemort's name incorrectly, the T should be silent. On the other hand, fans have used the channel to challenge Rowling's authority over the story. Lubbas (n.d.) stated that some fans had refused to accept the narrative when Rowling revealed that Albus Dumbledore was gay. At this point the power of narrative was shifting in a certain extend.

While a story is "understood and followed" through different types of media, one needs to be aware that different types of media usually do not share the same set of rules and protocols. A certain element may not be important in one type of media and it may be vital in another. Therefore, certain adaptation is needed when a story is transferred from one type of media to another. For example, a piece of article (Romano, 2018) reported Peter Jackson's reply on some critics towards the movie *Mortal Engines* (Jackson, 2018), which is based on Philip Reeve's *Mortal Engines* (2001) books. According to this report, many fans of the original books accusing the leading female character, Hester Shaw, is not as disfigured as she was described in Reeve's (2001) books. Peter Jackson and Visual-effects artist Christian Rivers believes that the original Hester Shaw from the books is too ugly to be portrayed on big screens. Hester's ugliness may not affect much when it is expressed through words, Peter Jackson believes it may distract audiences when it is visually presented. Although Peter Jackson and Philip Reeve's reply may sound reasonable, according to Nick Romano's (2018) report, this Hollywood-friendly version of Hester has caused



some pushback from some readers. It is also pointed out that critics that are mentioned in this case are created and spread through online platforms.

### **3.3. Fan identity**

Establishing and demonstrating identity is also significant within groups. In the initiation of Social Identity Theory (SIT), Tajfel (1974) proposed that identities are situational and could be affected by communication. Therefore, I assume that in communication about fandom objects, fan identities can be shaped.

As Wann (1995) and Reysen & Branscombe (2010) have already explored, being a fan is not simply enjoying the object itself, it also involves making connections with fan groups, people who have similar interests. As Barack Obama often had to answer for being “not black enough” (Augoustinos & De Garis, 2012), an individual who is self-identified as a fan would feel the need to displaying his/her fan identity in order better connect with others within the community (Chadborn, Edwards & Reysen, 2017).

It is notable that within a fan group, members tend to establish an identity of “true fan” and separate these authentic members from those who are less committed to the group. This had been discussed by Borer (2009). Borer (2009) suggested that in addition to all the common attributes like race, ethnicity, age, and gender, in most fan communities’ levels of commitment, interest and longevity is significant to in-group hierarchies. As Hecht et al. (2005) suggested, identity as self-conceptual may not be aligned with identity that emerged in relationship and collectivity. To fill in the identity gap, some people may choose to defend their identities and argue for

recognitions within groups.

### **3.4. Video game culture**

The earliest of video games expanded people's playgrounds. A simulated tennis game can be played without a tennis field or equipment. However, it is still difficult to gather multiple devoted players to play a game together. In his blog, Koster (2006) stated that Single-player games are designed to be played alone. Cyber technologies make it possible to use computers as opponents' role. Game developers also find that it is easier to deliver stories to human players when computers could also play the role of narrators.

Video game business is more than a successful entertainment industry. It has become a very popular type of media (Barr, 2007). Modern studies have attempted to explore video games as a new kind of media (Roig et al., 2009). As video games provide video, audio, text, as well as the possibility of interaction, Roig and his colleagues, suggested that video games helped to create a new kind of relationship between media and receiver. This relationship is far beyond spectatorship. The receivers do not only watch, read or listen to media. Instead, they play with the media.

De Smale, Kors, & Sandovar's (2017) study takes the producing team of This War of Mine as their focus group. This study suggested that gameplay can be seen as a form of language and it is *"a unique language that might make games more convincing than movies and, possibly, more effective in spreading messages"* (p.399). It is clear that game producers would intentionally use game products as a medium to pass on knowledge and ideologies.

Up to today, gaming has become a popular and influential activity. A market research conducted by Limelight Networks in January 2020 has proven not only do video games have wide audience groups, it also deeply affects players' daily lives. It is reported by Limelight Networks (January, 2020), gaming can interfere with daily activities. As it is pointed out in the report, casual single-player games are most popular. Players spend much time interacting with other players.

As players are great in number, Cao et al. (2009) suggested that for both players and gaming industries, community support is important. With the help of social networks, gaming communities have received major evolvement. Gaming communities are built for players to communicate, share experiences, and solve problems with the help of others. Thus Mavridou (2017) has proposed that scholars should look into players as fans instead of simply users. After reviewing different opinions from multiple presses and academic sources (Winkler, 2006, Jenkins, 2005, Williams, 2003, etc. cited in Shaw, 2010), Shaw (2010) attempted to find a good way to look at video game communities. Shaw (2010) concluded that video games can affect education, mobile technologies, museum displays, social functions, family interactions, and workplaces. Besides, player groups have intersections with many if not all traditional culture groups, such as age, gender, sex, race, religion, and nationality groups.

According to Shaw (2010), like many traditional culture groups, gamers as a whole entity also suffer from negative stereotypes, such as violence, "boys only", isolation, addiction, etc. Besides, shaw (2010) also found out that most scholars who

study gamers, look at video game culture from insider's viewpoint, while mass media, on the other hand, tend to look at it from the outside. Although it may not be Shaw's (2010) intention to stress on the tension between insiders and outsiders of gamers, he indeed mentioned there is tension between scholars and journalists regarding the spread of negative stereotypes and defending the gamers.

## **4. Methodology**

As it is mentioned above, this study means to apply and test the core assumptions of CTI in CMC environment. Digital platform is a new test field for CTI, the research method should adapt into the new scenario as well. Different from some of the earliest studies around CTI, due to the nature of this study subject, it allows me to witness the original materials where communication happened instead of having the communicators to re-create those moments through surveys or interviews. This way I can reduce errors and potential influence during the communication between myself and the research subjects.

### **4.1. Research questions**

- How are identities constructed in the forum posts? As has been mentioned in chapter 2, characteristics of the channel may affect the construction of identity. In this case, I will discuss further on how text-based online forum helped to shape users' identity.
- What kind of identity gaps are present, and how are they dealt with? Previous studies on identity gaps focus mainly on a specific kind of identity gap. In this study, I intend to focus on the environment of communication and see what kind of identity gaps appear to be visible in the chosen forum
- How do CTI propositions appear in a text-based forum? As Hech et al. (2005) and Shin & Hecht (2017) proposed, new media technology has the potential to bring more dimension into CTI. From this point of view, I intend to evaluate in the online forum, how CTI propositions could be different, and how it could

be extended.

#### **4.2. Approach**

The initial purpose of the study is to understand how CTI adapts into online environment. I intend to hold a qualitative approach towards the topic by applying content analysis on the forum discussions.

Qualitative analysis aims to study the data thoroughly in details. Atieno (2009) considered that qualitative research is a proper approach towards such a purpose that is to learn from the participants in a setting. My goal in this study is not to measure frequency or degree of, for example, certain behaviors. I attempt to find out how do the participants achieve their goal through certain behavior, thus instead of study numbers, the data lie behind words and other contents that have been passed on in the forum.

My study method is constructed following Holtz, Kronverger & Wagner's (2012) article on analyzing online forums, with some adaptation for my specific case. After locating the forum and the section, it is recommended by Holtz, Kronverger & Wagner (2010) that the data could be categorized using a single post as a unit. However, as this study is within the realm of communication, I need to put single posts into a context of the discussion, thus, for this study, I categorized the data into different topics with thread as a unit.

Besides, as it has been criticized in previous chapters. Previous studies on CTI often present an identity gap in advance and search data accordingly. As Holtz, Kronverger & Wagner (2012) stated, one of the reasons to look into online forums is

that the data there is natural, with few social constraints. In this study, I monitor the communication on-site and assume different layers of participants' identity may appear visibly at some stage and begin to affect the communication.

On the other hand, Andreotta et al. (2019) present a common issue that appears for many researchers using online forums and social media as sources of data. The massive amount of text materials is nearly impossible to process in many cases. Andreotta et al. (2019) and Holtz, Kronverger & Wagner (2012) both proposed to use digital tools in such situations. However, due to my choice of forum and section as well as the time period, I decided to process the data manually. The scale of my data in present in the next section. With a few months, the workload was under control. Processing manually benefits me to perceive each discussion as a whole as many digital tools only follow specific threads or posts and unable to categorize the data based on topics of discussions. Besides, some other elements may be overlooked, for example, usernames, profile pictures, and user groups.

### **4.3.The case: The Witcher 3 official forum**

#### **4.3.1. The Witcher transmedia universe**

The Witcher games franchise started with its first game published in 2007, developed by a Polish studio, CD Projekt Red (CDPR) and published by Atari. The Witcher is based on The Witcher novel series of the same name by Polish author Andrzej Sapkowski. The original story by Sapkowski happens in a medieval-style fantasy world with magic and beasts, surrounding the protagonist character, Geralt of Rivia. In the story, Geralt belongs to an organization of mutant monster hunters,

known as witchers. During Geralt's adventure, he experiences various of magical, political, and moral incidents. The games' narrative follows the ending of the original story as a continuance. Although the original story by Sapkowski had already hit major success in Poland, it was the game that brought the story to a world-class stage.

Following the first game in 2007, CDPR produced two sequels, *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* (2011) and *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* (2015). Two expansions for *The Witcher 3* were later published, *Heart of Stone* (2015) and *Blood and Wine* (2016).

During the past decade, *The Witcher* game franchise earned an excellent reputation as well as many awards in the game industry. *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* alone, including the extensions, has reportedly won more than 800 prizes, awarded by different media and organizations in the video game industry (GOG, November, 2016). The most notable awards include Game of the Year and Best RPG of The Game Awards 2015. It has been nominated for many other awards as well. On steam up to the beginning of 2020, *The Witcher 3* received "overwhelmingly positive" reviews from its player with 98% of players gave positive feedback. *The Witcher* and *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* also received many praises and honors.

*The Witcher* games, players control the main character, Geralt of Rivia, with a third-person perspective. Under the players' guide, Geralt would engage enemies, talk to, or trade with certain characters. Some of these actions may serve as triggers to push the main story forward, some may have minor effects on Geralt or the game world, and some may cause little differences to the storyline and merely as an element



of immersion. Although the control systems and graphic performance are changing over the years, The Witcher games trilogy share the same basic mechanism. Additionally, in The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings and The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, players have the opportunity to control some different characters for a short and limited period.



Figure 1, A screenshot of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015), Retrieve from IGN

(n.d.)

Apart from The Witcher trilogy, other The Witcher theme games in smaller scales are also made, including the famous multiplayer card game, The Gwent (2016). The Gwent was originally a mini card game implanted in The Wither 3: Wild Hunt. The mini game is so popular among the players that CDPR later included some physical Gwent decks in physical packages of the game's expansions. However, the players' call for a standalone The Gwent game had never stopped until The Gwent (2016) was finally available to the world. Shortly after the success of The Gwent, a single-player alternative of The Gwent hit the market. The single-player Gwent game

was named as *Thronebreaker: The Witcher Tales* (2018), in which a comparatively separate story of The Witcher universe is told.

Not only the digital products, according to CD PROJEKT Capital Group's financial report in Q1 2019, CDPR's physical goods are taking a great share of its income. Among those goods, it is likely that The Witcher theme merchandise was included. Countless goods such as board games, movable figures, art books, and many co-branded products can be found in the market.

At the end of 2019, a Netflix exclusive TV series, *The Witcher*, was brought online. Featuring some of the most well-known stories from the original books, the TV series added some original stories in the narrative. Although the Netflix series is not the first screen adaptation of Sapkowski's *The Witcher* story, perhaps thanks to the success of *The Witcher* games, this TV series received more popularity than the previous screen adaptations of *The Witcher*. However, CDPR is not involved in the production of *The Witcher* TV series.

#### **4.3.2. The forum**

This study is going to focus on *The Witcher* games' official forum, built and operated by the games' developer, CDPR. It is a channel of CDPR's official forum. All the discussion in the CDPR forum is open and public, spectators do not need a user account to see other users' discussion. One does need a user account to post or reply to a topic of discussion, however, register a new user account does not require private information, thus the users are given the liberty to be completely anonymous. 10 replies are needed before a new user can create a new thread. A user's nickname

functions as the unique identification within the forum. During discussions, posts of moderators, ex-moderators, and CDPR staff would be marked differently from regular users. In March 2020, some new features were introduced to the forum, such as the achievement system and experience ranks.

Same as in most forums, the participants use text as basic means of communication, while other elements can be used as supplemental to enrich messages. It is also possible to react directly to a specific message.

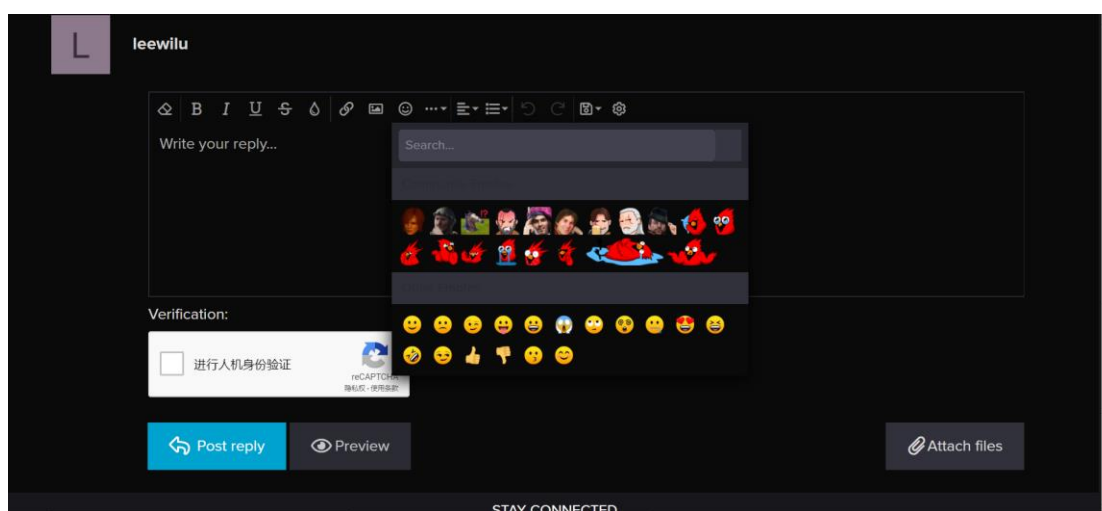


Figure 2, Screenshot of The Witcher forum, comment area

The CDPR forum and its channels function in ten languages. This study only focuses on the English version, which is the most active one compared to other languages.

Additionally, due to the purpose of the study, I focus on discussions related to the story of the game. The forum provides a specific space for discussing story-related topics. However, in order to see the full list of threads, the forum requires me to select a specific game. Here I choose The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt because the majority of the participants under The Witcher 3 column are closer to the end of the trilogy and are

best informed with knowledge of the game world. The Witcher 3 column is also the most active one.

#### 4.4. Data collection and process

Up to today, the forum continues to be active. In the selected space, there are around 4500 threads available for reply. The most discussed thread has almost 2000 posts and replies.

*Figure 1* presents an obfuscated example of data. The thread title, post contents, and some basic user information is visible to all.

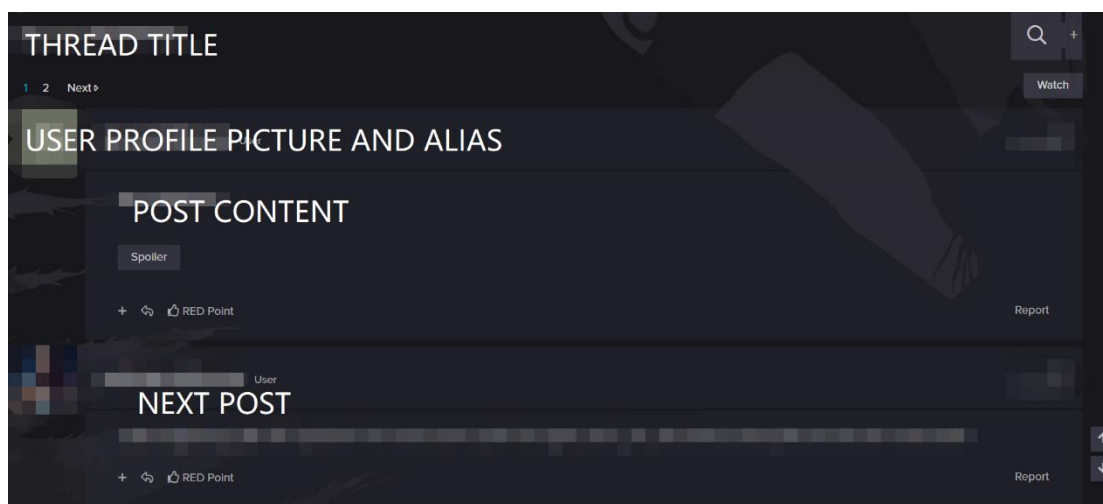


Figure 3: An example of a forum post and user interface

While the forum lies entirely in the public domain and is pseudonymized by default, for this study image and direct quotes are anonymized. This is done due to the easy searchability of the original data, and due to the fact, that for the study at hand, detailed knowledge of individual posters or the way they specifically use language is not necessary.

I went through all active discussion threads with at least one reply between the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2019 and the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2020. Any thread that had not received any

reply since 2018 was considered “dead” and no longer active. Within the selected time period, there are around 80 threads available, the total number of replies goes beyond 5000.

The data was collected directly from the forum pages. A list of titles and links was made for further review. All threads were gone through twice. In the first time, I check on the original post when a thread was created, to receive a basic idea on what topic the discussion was about. Based on the threads’ purposes and topics, a categorize of threads is created, presented in table 1. In the second time, data was analyzed thoroughly based on propositions of CTI (Hecht et al., 2005). During the procedure, I looked into all posts and replies.

Table 1 Categorize of Thread Topics

Topic	Description	Frequency (Number of Threads)
1. Romance Endings	Threads related to Geralt’s romantic relationship at the end of the game	5
2. Political Endings	Threads related to TW3’s political outcomes at the end of the game	3
3. Ciri Endings	Threads related to Ciri’s fate at the end of the game	2
4. Other Decisions	Threads related to minor decisions that have an impact on endings of side quests or chapters, but do not affect the end of the game	5
5. Call for help	Threads related to a question that obstructs one’s proceeding with one or more quests.	30
6. Express emotion or opinion	Threads, of which the main purpose was to comment or express feelings.	15

7. Playstyle	Threads related to discussions on playstyle.	4
8. Story and world exploration	Threads related to the story and in-game environments that have no or little links with completing the quests.	22
9. Proposal to developer:	Threads related to players' wishes for future updates.	3
10. Sharing	Threads related to re-post contents from other sources (Facebook, Youtube, Reddit, etc.)	3
11. Others	Isolated cases, separate from all other topics. Not closely related to the game.	2

For a better understanding of the categorizing, in the next part, I will give some detailed descriptions on each topic group, with some explanation of their backgrounds. As it has been mentioned above, to avoid abuse of searchable information, I will not use direct quotes of any posts or replies. Many threads and discussions fit the descriptions of multiple groups, therefore there are often intersections between two or more threads groups.

### ***Romance endings***

In each of The Witcher games, there are different romance options for the main character, Geralt of Rivia. The player is given the options to develop romantic relationships between Geralt and a female character. Different choices lead to 3 outcomes at the end of the game: A) Geralt stays alone; B) Geralt lives with Yennefer of Vangerburg; C) Geralt lives with Triss Merigold. Under *Romance Ending* threads, people were actively discussing with who and why should Geralt ends up with. The

choice between Yennefer and Triss may have made one of the biggest diverse among The Witcher fans.

Surprisingly, another character has made her way into this competition. Shani, a recurring character of The Witcher trilogy and leading female character in the first DLC of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, Heart of Stone. Although Shani was never meant to be an option for another alternative ending, many fans hope to see Geralt ending up with her.

### ***Political endings***

Some of Geralt's behavior could affect the political situation in the fantasy universe of The Witcher games. In The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, based on the choices the player made, there are three alternatives concerning the political outcomes at the end of the game: A) Nilfgaardian invasion wins and Emperor Emyr von Emrys rules majority of Northern Realms. B) The Northern Realms defeat the invaders and the tyrant Radovid rules the north. C) The Northern Realms defeat the invaders and a cunning spymaster, Sigismund Dijkstra. However, it is worth mentioning that according to the forum discussions on the choices concerning the political endings, the decisions are not always made for in-game political purposes. I will discuss the choices further in later chapters. Another political outcome that is mentioned in the epilogue is the alternative ruler of Skellige, either the warrior King Hjalmar or the peacemaker Queen Cerys. Although there are only a few threads focus on the ruler of Skellige, I consider it as a major decision for its appearance in the epilogue.

### ***Ciri endings***

The main narrative of story in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt* focuses on the main character, Geralt of Rivia searching for his adopted daughter and protégé, Ciri. Many decisions the player makes in-game as Geralt may affect Ciri's destiny at the end of the game. There are three alternatives concerning Ciri's fate: A) Ciri presumably dies in the final quest; B) Ciri becomes a witcher; C) Ciri becomes the crown princess of the Nifgaadian Empire. As Ciri has been known as the sole heir of Emperor Emyr in the original works of Sapkowski and the beginning of *The Witcher 3*, many players in the forum consider Ciri's fate as a variety of political options. Thus, there is an intersection between Political Endings threads and Ciri endings threads.

Besides, with all the combination from the above-mentioned endings, the end of *Blood and Wine*, the last expansion would be different in 4 alternatives: A) Ciri visits Geralt in his villa; B) Yennefer visits Geralt in his villa; C) Triss visits Geralt in his villa; D) Dandelion, an old friend of Geralt, visits him in his villa. Many players also wish to add Shani in these options, however, CDPR has not officially responded to these requests.

### ***Minor decisions***

Many other decisions could affect the storyline of *The Witcher* games, yet does not change the epilogue of *The Witcher 3*. Many of these minor decisions are also well discussed in the forum. For example, multiple threads mentioned a quest, in which Geralt could choose to betray his imperial employer to set some northern guerrilla member free. Although these in-game options did not make their outcomes demonstrated in the epilogue, these discussions are also very active in the forum.



Some may be more popular than the major option. Besides, many alternative storylines concerning endings of *The Witcher* and *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings* are also categorized in this group. As some players criticized in the forum, the choices in the previous games appear to be insignificant for *The Witcher 3*, despite that they are all good stories.

All three above mentioned threads groups focus on in-game choices that affect the storyline. The interaction under such threads is usually debates and arguments. Thanks to the active presence of moderators in this forum, few of these discussions turned aggressive.

### ***Call for help***

This category includes those threads in which players ask others for help. The creators of these threads were facing an issue that stopped them from completing one or more quests. Questions related to bugs, storylines, difficult combats, and hard choices are all included in this group. This category has intersections with many other groups. For example, many threads addressed a quest, in which Geralt is supposed to search for some gears in Kaer Morhen area. However, many players could not find Kaer Morhen on the map.

The help from repliers also varies. While most of the answers applied straight solutions, many others choose to guide the ones who need help indirectly to avoid lack of challenge or spoilers. Instead of telling that Kaer Morhen area would be unlocked later, some suggested those who asked the question to focus on other tasks.

### ***Express emotion or opinion***

Threads under this category were created mainly to express general feelings or ideas on the game and the society. No specific quest or issue is addressed in these threads, or the specific issue was addressed to better explain the thread creator's feeling. For example, many threads were created to express the players' emptiness after finishing the whole game. These contents usually attract those who share the same feelings to react to the posts.

### ***Playstyle***

A few threads mentioned detailed gameplay in The Witcher 3. For example, one thread complained about the difficulty of gaining in-game currency and asked for help from other players. Participants then started to discuss strategies on how to make money in The Witcher 3. And naturally, it has some intersection with the call for help threads.

### ***Story and world exploration***

Threads under this group are most intriguing for me. Since the obvious goal of the game has been set and distributed to players in the form of quests, many other elements are made to increase immersion. Threads under this category focus on the story related issues that are not stressed or not even mentioned in works of The Witcher universe. None of these issues has practical effect on proceeding the For example, among The Witcher fans, there are many conspiracy theories of the fantasy world. One particular theory mentioned Triss Merigold, a lover of Geralt, has romance involvement with Lambert, a fellow witcher of Geralt. This has never been confirmed by anyone who participated in creating the story. Fans who are in favor of

this theory have provided much indirect evidence to back it up. For me it is amusing to see how people gather evidence for something that is happened in a whole world that does not exist.

Nevertheless, such explorations of the story have generated many interesting discussions in the forum. Those who are against such theories or opinions are also providing evidence to tackle those proposals.

### ***Proposal to developer***

Although players rapidly express dissatisfactions in the forum, only a few would directly address the game developer and propose a seemingly possible improvement plan. Many of these proposals have received support or different opinions from other forum users. For example, there was one thread proposing to have the most significant characters arranged and interactable in the game world when the main story is completed, in order to make the game world less empty. This proposal received several supporters and received an unofficial explanation from a member of CDPR.

### ***Sharings***

Some threads are created to post content from different sources, including other fan community platforms, other games, and mass media. For example, there is one post shared a YouTube video, commenting The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt. Another thread was created to share an Easter egg found in another game, The Sinking City, referring a character from The Witcher 3. Some fun art and beautiful in-game screenshots are also included under this category as they share many features with reposts.

## **5. Key findings**

### **5.1. Self-conceptual**

Baumeister (1982) noted that self-conceptual is a primary motivation for self-presentation. Since the user profile is created when the users are not engaging others, it may be comparatively separate from the self-presentation during communication. By study users' deliberately created profile information, it may be possible to further study their personal layer of identity.

As Müller-Braune (2018) states in his Master's thesis when conducting a research on RTS online players, self-image can be influenced by many factors even without any form of visual proxy. Given the functionality of the forum, the most straightforward way to demonstrate an image of self is through profile picture, nickname, and post contents.

#### ***User names***

The forum gives each user a similar role. while physical appearance is not present by default, building self-image in the forum shows some different patterns than face-to-face communication.

Although it is hardly to be sure, many of these nicknames may contain clues of users' off-line identity. For example, my user name "leewilu". The user includes many clues on my offline identities. The part "leewi" is a variant of Leevi, a Finnish name I used a few years ago. Although I do not have Finnish origin nor citizenship, this name does demonstrate my affiliation with Finland. The other "lu" is a part of my official Chinese name. Many other names may contain other information such as

places or year numbers. It is difficult to interpret detailed personal information from the user names. As the user names are built in different languages with different forms of variants and motivation, interpretation is almost impossible, however, it is identifiable that some people would bring their offline identities into the forum through user names.

Apart from those user names which may contain official identities, subculture identity may as well be detected. Many names contain other popular culture titles or elements. To better explain such user name, I will give a fabricated example, this example is made up based on a real user name from the forum. “startrek2063”. In order to protect the searchable information of the user, I will not reveal the user’s real user name. Although from this fabricated user name, I can hardly be sure that this user is a big fan of Star Trek, it is likely that this user has some positive attachment toward Star Trek, so that the user does not mind to be associated with the title. Many user names contain numbers that could be perceived as their year of birth. However, in this specific case, 2063 is very unlikely to be the year of birth. Connecting to Star Trek, it is plausible to refer to the year of the first contact in Star Trek story.

Many user names include elements from The Witcher universe. A few users choose to “be” existing characters in the story by using the characters’ names in their official names. Others may combine The Witcher and other elements. For example, following this pattern, my user name could be “*Sir\_Qianlu\_of\_Rivia*”, a fictional title and origin with my real name.

### ***Profile image***

The most common kind of profile pictures that is being used in The Witcher 3 Forum's Story column is the default one. In CDPR forum, user profile picture is not compulsory, therefore many users don't bother to upload their own pictures and only use default images, which shows the first letter of the username in capital letter.

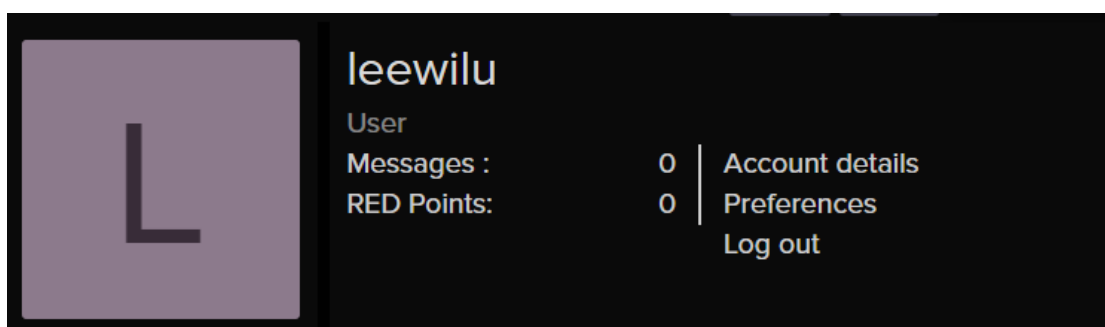


Figure 4, The Witcher forum, user profile example

Apart from those who do not bother to upload an image for a profile picture, many users have profile pictures that are associated with their nickname. For example, one particular user, named after a character from Lord of the Rings, using an image with Quendya text, a fictional language created by J. R. R. Tolkien, spoken by elves in the world of Lord of the Rings.

In CDPR forum, the user name is a unique fixed identification that is not allowed to be changed. On the other hand, user profile pictures are more flexible. The user can change his or her profile picture any time he or she wants. In this case, while the username may reflect a user's self-conception during the period when he or she created the profile, the picture can tell more about their up-to-date self-identification. Some users choose images without notable relevance with their user names.

### ***In-post content***

Many users regularly attach their signature lines in their posts. The signature

line could be a motto, a joke, or a reference. For example, the signature line *“It’s bigger on the inside”*, shows the user's attachment to BBC’s Doctor Who. Among the analyzed data, the signature lines are in a different language, which is also a part of users’ attempts to build a self-image. Some moderators would also attach some notifications in their signature line. One particular moderator refers to him- or herself as “guard” instead of a moderator presumably to create a lore-friendly self-image.

I would like to argue that nicknames, profile images, and signature lines are windows to individuals’ personal and enacted layers of identities. Nickname, profile image, and signature line are usually out of context of any specific discussion, but the theme of forum and intension for individuals to join the forum are usually pre-determined. The choice of nickname, profile image, and the possible signature line are like choosing an outfit before going outside. (Here I only consider the decoration function of cloths). On one hand, an individual may have a general plan on the following day when choosing clothes to wear, on the other hand, it is difficult to predict specific encounters. Therefore, while the nickname and image are based on a function of identification as self, it also serves as a message of “who I am” for others in the forum.

Different from face-to-face communication, these visual mediums are less limited by the user’s real-life physical appearance. For example, As an East-Asian male myself, I could use an image of a Caucasian female as my profile picture. Although people know that the image may differ a lot from my physical characteristics, yet given time people could still associate myself with the image.

Digital environment may have given scholars a better field to look into individuals' inner selves without bond to their physical appearance. In this way not only do the study subjects be allowed to go beyond their physical form, the researchers themselves may also reduce the chance of being biased.

## **5.2. Character vs. player**

Forum users use different personal pronouns during discussions. When discussing players' in-game behaviors, some forum users tend to use Geralt as subject, others prefer to use "I" instead. There are also some users who switch pronouns during discussions, and some even use both pronouns in one post. For example, one post explains several choices the player made during the playthrough. "Geralt ended up with Yennefer and I made Dijkstra the king." The sentence is paraphrased. The user used different perspectives to justify different choices.

As Kavli (2012) pointed out, the word "player character" clearly includes two factors, the player, and the character. Klevjer (2007) argued that the character is like a role for the player to act in the game world. The character's action and behavior may very much depend on the player, yet the character is defined by someone else. The main player character in this case is, by this definition, a typical player character. The character Geralt of Rivia is originally created by Andrzej Sapkowski in his novel series, *The Witcher*. Before any player could play as Geralt, the character had already gained some fame.

Klevjer (2007) also indicated the differences between player character and avatar. The word "avatar" is often used in digital contexts to describe players' digital



representative in digital environments. A player may take in-game actions via his/her avatar. Kavli (2012) uses Skyrim as an example to explain the term. The race, name, appearance, voice, and skills of the avatar are defined by the player and the player is given the power to freely explore the game world through the avatar.

However, I would argue that the player characters or the avatars are always to some extent pre-defined by the people other than the player as well as the player. The extent may vary within a scale. For example, the main character in Mass Effect (2007) franchise, Commander Shepard, would be somewhere between avatar and player character by Klevjer's (2017) definition. On one hand, Shepard has a fixed surname, title, social connections and etc. On the other hand, the player may decide Shepard's sex, class and adjust appearance. These playable characters are all partly pre-designed by game developer and others, and can be partly defined by the player. Therefore, in this study, I define player character as an opposite to non-player character, i.e. all characters that are mainly controlled by the player.

In this study, data shows a diversity among players between attempting to gain more control over Geralt and attempting to behave in a way "the real Geralt" would. In many discussions (majority in category 1, 2, 3 and 4), participants use two different sets of logic and perspectives

One is when a participant tries to express their opinion from the player's point of view. For example, when discussing the best ending for Ciri, many participants use phrases such as "*I like*", "*I don't like*" or "*It makes me feel like*". Many of them choose one option because they like it or could not accept others, despite the fact that

some of them believe “Geralt would do otherwise”.

On the other hand, another kind of argument use expressions with Geralt and/or Ciri as subjects. For example, one reply stated that “From my experience with TW2, I conclude that the Emperor cannot be trusted, but Geralt trusts Yennerfer and the people she chooses to ally with”. The sentence is paraphrased. Although the perception of Geralt behavior is after all based on individuals’ opinions, it is obvious that some people are more motivated to consider the feeling of Geralt, who does not even exist in the real world.

In the forum discussion, participants are bound by their experiences playing as Geralt of Rivia. Thus, I can argue that what is best and most proper for Geralt is a communal value in this collectivity. Therefore, when speaking from the perspective of Geralt, one is emphasizing their communal layer of identity as a The Witcher fan, instead of addressing Geralt as another entity.

### **5.3. Fantasy vs. Reality**

In the threads discussing The Witcher world and stories (in category 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8), many participants attempt to judge or analyze people, organizations, and events based on common sense in reality. For example, one user created a thread to make comments and discuss the culture of Skellige islands, a Viking style area, and faction in The Witcher world. The creator of the thread expressed that although Skellige is portrayed as a positive area, where Geralt does not rapidly suffer from harassments and has some real friends, this place may be considered evil and barbaric in a modern standard of values and ethics.

While the creator of the thread tries to bring their interpretation of modern moral standards into the discussion, they were actually referring to the shared value of modern civilization, which can be seen as a communal value of another collectivity.

Another similar expression can be seen in a thread discussing the possibility for Geralt to threesome with Triss and Yennefer in a cut scene. While some players are not very happy with the fact that this option is not available in the game, others believe that it is sensible to forbid Geralt to develop romantic relationship or have sex with both female main characters based on common sense in our reality. On the other hand, based on the background of the lore and sexual history of the characters, some argued in the discussion that such a scenario is possible and not considered unacceptable in the fictional world.

The expression of “common sense” may give me some clue on the individual's real-world background, since being against threesome is not exactly a universal standard in the real world. Again, such opinions can also be seen as values from other collectivities.

As it is mentioned in previous sections, the experience and perspective of Geralt can be seen as emotion and viewpoints generated by the forum user's communal identity as players of The Witcher games (see 6.2). Therefore, such discussions can be perceived as a collision of two different communal identities.

Shin & Hecht (2017) pointed out that previous focus mainly on identity gaps, which by definition is a kind of conflict between different layers of identities. My finding of the collisions between communal identities generated from different

collectivities has not yet been thoroughly discussed and measured. I agree that the suggestion mentioned in Shin & Hecht (2017), “the layers be reconceptualized to personal, relational, enacting, and group at both individual and communal levels” (p.6) among all the alternatives given in the article. This direction may provide a clear framework to explain and measure different individuals’ interpretations of communal values and conflicts between group-based identities generated in different communities.

#### 5.4. Character attachment

According to Bopp et al. (2019), engaging game characters are usually key to positive and emotionally rich player experience. Believable game characters should be able to develop emotional bonds with the player (Isbister, 2006). Bopp et al. (2019) categorized several types of emotional attachments toward game characters:

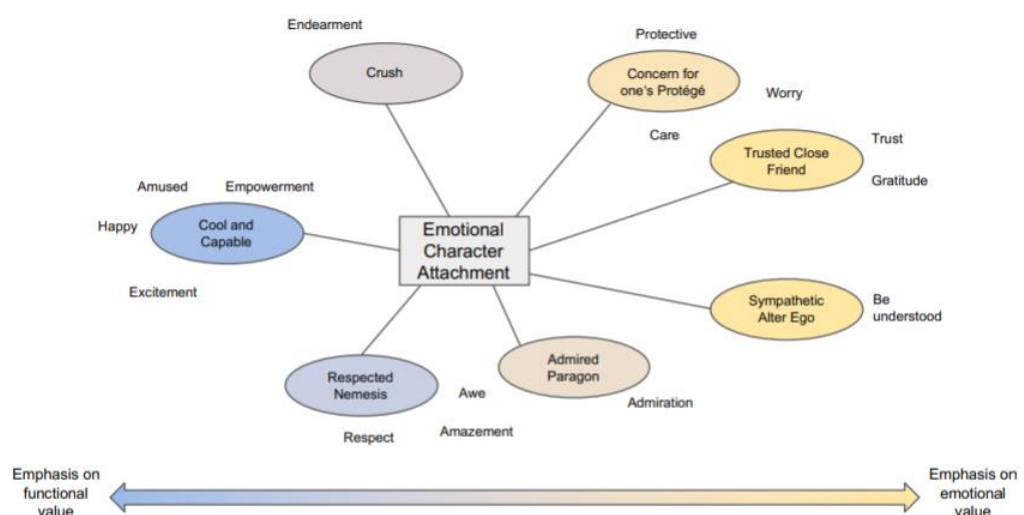


Figure 5. The final thematic map representing the seven forms of emotional attachment identified with the key emotions. (Bopp et al., 2019)

It is important to mention that these emotional attachments can be developed towards both player characters and non-player characters (NPCs). From Bopp et al.'s (2019) result, it is notable that some of these attachments, such as “cool and capable”, “admired paragon” and “sympathetic alter ego” are mainly related to player characters, while others, such as “respected nemesis”, “crush”, “concern for one’s protege” and “trusted close friend”, are related more to NPCs.

Several examples can be observed in threads related to political options (category 2), particularly in those that discuss whether it is a good option to help Sigismund Dijkstra becomes the ruler of the northern realms. With most players believe that Dijkstra is indeed a suitable king that the northern realms need, few players, however, are willing to make the decision.

In these discussions, many gave the argument that helping Dijkstra becomes the king would require Geralt to abandon Vernon Roche, who has been a faithful ally and friend of Geralt since the event of *The Witcher 2: Assassins of Kings*. Due to the attachment towards Roche, many players expressed that they are unwilling to allow Dijkstra to kill Roche, instead they choose to stand with Roche against Dijkstra. Such a choice would lead to the ending in which the Empire takes over.

Many players would choose to use such expressions as “I do not want to abandon Roche” in these discussions. Many players, show strong attachment towards Roche and identify themselves as friends of Roche. Furthermore, they feel the need to defend Roche against fictional hostile actions and openly justify their decisions.

On the relational layer of identity, Hecht et al. argued that individuals would

perceive their own identities through relationships with other people. In previous studies, relational identity is discussed mainly based on relations between individuals. In this case, although it may sound like an identity emerged from a relationship with Roche, Vernon Roche is a fictional character and by nature a component of an object. Therefore, such self-identification as Roche's friend should be considered in the personal layer and enacted layer of identity, instead of relational layer.

On the other hand, since Roche is not a real person and players' contact with Roche is through another in-character, Geralt. Other people will not see these individuals as Roche's friends. An identity gap is emerged during these forum discussions when one considers him- or herself as a friend of Roche while others do not acknowledge it.

One possible way to cope with such identity gap is to project the players' personal feelings into the player character, Geralt. By using expressions like "Geralt and Roche are friends", participants disengage themselves as individuals from the narrative and use Geralt as a communal identity (see 6.2).

It is also worth mentioning that not only do characters can be subjects of attachment, players could also develop attachment towards fictional organizations, places, and societies. In the above-mentioned discussions, some have argued that to "make the north great again", it is necessary to sacrifice Roche and make Dijkstra the ruler. Such arguments rarely use Geralt as a proxy since many lines in the game have suggested that Geralt does not have a strong attachment toward the northern kingdoms. Instead, some participants in such discussions emphasized that they consider

themselves as, for example, “supporters of the north” or “northern nationalist”, to establish a communal identity and gather others who support the north under the same “banner” in these discussions.

## **5.5. Dynamics of power**

### *Roles of authority*

Many participants of the forum have successfully established a certain level of authority. Some are based on the basic function and management of the forum. For example, both moderators and CDPR staff have special marks on their profile page as well as all their posts and replies. These roles do not only give such individuals certain practical privileges in the daily operation of the forum, but they also affected others' views on them. For example, the threads with CDPR staff participated often receive a bigger amount of replies up to a few hundred while others usually would not reach three figures. Although all the topics in the forum are supposed to be open for discussion, CDPR staff members' status as storyteller remains important at a certain level. In many unsettled discussions, some regular users often use the “at” function to address the discussions to CDPR staff members, demanding an “official” conclusion.

Official members of CDPR and moderator team are not the only ones with special roles in the forum. In The Witcher forum, some authorities are built through knowledge and devotion. For example, in a discussion on the possibility of threesome, as explained in section 6.4. To prevent a player to lose the chance to develop a romantic relationship for Geralt, a moderator addressed the question to a common user, who has repeatedly demonstrated the knowledge and skill to temper with the

game data and unblock some options that were not designed to achieve in the game. When similar discussion appears, this user would be considered a guru and an authority in the topic.

Another comparatively less special role in the forum the creators of threads. The creator of a thread does not only create the thread and decide the topic of the discussion. After the thread is open for discussion, the creator could close the thread and change it into read-only mode, without further explanation. In some debates, the creator would choose to terminate when opinions in the discussion are satisfactory for him or her. On the other hand, participants in the discussion may feel otherwise. Some of them would start their own threads and attach links to the original threads.

### ***Powershift in narrative***

The Witcher franchise has given players many decisions, among which many could affect the narrative, some may affect the ending of the main quest. When CDPR decided to make a game franchise with multiple narrative choices and alternative endings, it had become predictable that players would spend a lot of time to discuss and debate on the “real” ending.

As it has been mentioned above, the presence of CDPR staff is obvious in the forum. In many discussions and debates, participants would occasionally address the questions to CDPR staff. It is interesting that the forum only marks a CDPR staff member as such, without specifying their role. It means that many of these CDPR staff members would not have enough knowledge or influence over storylines. However, that does not seem to bother the other users in the forum. They tend to view



CDPR as an entire entity, instead of a collective of separate individuals. CDPR as a whole is usually seen as the authority of the story.

The application of CDPR's authority does not necessarily require the participation of a CDPR staff member. In many discussions, participants attempt to speculate the developer's intention in the narrative. In one thread discussing the endings, one participant believed that the tragic ending, which most players tend to avoid, is the best and the ending CDPR intended as canon. The participant gave a list of reasons to support this claim. Many disagreements also quoted a 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary video dropped by CDPR on 3<sup>rd</sup> of September, 2017 through their The Witcher YouTube channel. Some details of the video suggested the event in the video happened after one of the happy endings. In this study, the "true" ending of the game is not significant. What one needs to see is that the participants are discussing the ending and try to persuade one another by borrowing the perspective of the developer. It is safe to say that in this case, the author is not completely "dead".

On the other hand, as has been mentioned in Chapter 3 in the Harry Potter case, an interactive online platform could indeed make the author hand over some power of storytelling to the crowd. The users of the forum are given the power to challenge the authority of the game developer. One of the examples can be found in the thread discussing Romance endings, where a popular character, Shani has been repeatedly mentioned. One user developed a comparatively complete idea that could fit into the game narrative: If the player failed or refused to develop romantic relationship with Yennefer and Triss in the main game, and developed romantic relationship with Shani

in Heart of Stone, the first expansion of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, Shani should visit Geralt in his villa at the end of the second expansion, Blood and Wine. Although CDPR does not seem to plan to add Shani as one of Geralt's romance options in the game, after all, it did not stop the player from imagining it. Many users expressed that this has already been the "true" ending for them. This proposal has been supported by many, including some of those who do not adore Shani that much. They believe that CDPR should put this cutscene into the game.

Although the forum is built and operated by CDPR, the game developer, one should remember that the story of The Witcher had started before the games came out. Although CDPR's The Witcher games share the same universe with The Witcher stories wrote by Sapkowski, yet the games have shown different narrative styles from the books, due to the different mediums and different understandings toward the story.

While some players view CDPR as the authority of the story, others would refer to the original stories by Sapkowski. This diversity is particularly visible in the threads discussing choices among Triss and Yennefer. While Triss Merigold had been a regular character since the beginning of the first game of The Witcher franchise and had developed a strong attachment with Geralt and the players, Yennefer of Vengerberg was only mentioned in the second game, and finally became a main character in the third game. As at the beginning of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, many players have not even figured out who Yennefer is, it is difficult for them to have Geralt develop romantic relationship with Yennefer. However, many players who had also read the books consider Yennefer to be the only true love of Geralt. Many fans of

the books are even against the idea of having Triss as a romance option since this does not seem to be the intension of Sapkowski.

In this case, the diversity of choosing Yennefer or Triss can actually be seen as a debate between those who see CDPR as the authority and those who see Sapkowski as the authority. During the negotiations, certain identities and communal values are revealed. For example, by justifying their choices, many players revealed their knowledge with The Witcher novels, the participants of such discussion also established their identities as readers or players, some may even have shown a gap between two groups.

## **6. Conclusion**

### **6.1. Identity construction in the forum**

Same to Müller-Braune's (2018) finding, the unavoidable user name would be a good channel to construct one's image of self. Profile picture is also a method to build self-image even. Even when a user chooses not to upload a unique image as profile image, a self-construction is also done through the behavior of not doing. Users are also given the option to use signature lines to construct and demonstrate identities.

Apart from the deliberate demonstration of identity, users intentionally or unintentionally build and enhance their role in the forum by repeatedly demonstrate certain patterns on, for example, knowledge, opinion, and behavior. In time, these patterns become parts of the users' self-conceptual as well as others' perceptions.

### **6.2. Identity gaps in The Witcher 3 forum**

Not all identity gaps are visible or interpretable from the forum discussions, since participants of discussions are granted high level of liberty to disengage the communication. However, in this study, two identity gaps can be overserved in the forum.

One is between the communal identity of playing as Geralt and some players' personal identities. This identity gap is similar to the identity gaps identified by previous studies, existing between different layers of one's identity. However, different from previous studies, I did not focus on a specific kind of personal identity, instead, I conclude that players' communal identity of playing a specific character has the potential to create identity gaps with players' personal identities.

Another gap is fan identity and real-world identity. Different from previous studies, this is not a gap between different layers of identity, it exists in the same dimension. When an individual attempts to bring the idea lies within another communal identity, it may have conflicts with the currently active communal identity among the group because of the context. Therefore, as Shin & Hecht (2017) suggested, identity can be group-based.

Different from the previous studies of CTI (e.g. Jackson, 2002a, 2002b, Hecht & Jung, 2008, Hecht & Faulkner, 2010, etc.), in which people are concluded to have tendency to hide one or more layers of their identity. In this study, the result shows a tendency to open for discussion on identity gaps. This may be resulted by the casual topic of the forum, or by active interferences of moderators. The nature of CMC may also reduce the feedback of the emotions that come with such gaps.

### **6.3. Adapting CTI in The Witcher 3 forum**

Some of the CTI propositions can be observed directly in the forum, including:

- *Identities are both enduring and changing.*
- *Identities have both content and relationship levels of interpretation.*
- *Identities involve both subjective and ascribed meaning.*
- *Identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication.*
- *Identities are enacted in social behavior and symbols.*
- *Identities emerge in relationship to other people.*
- *Identities are enacted in relationships.*
- *Relationships develop identities as social entities.*

- *Identities are meanings ascribed to the self by others in the social world.*
- *Identities emerge out of groups and networks.*
- *Identities are hierarchically ordered social roles.*

Some of the CTI propositions can be partly observed in the forum, including:

- *Identities are affective, cognitive, behavioral, and spiritual.*
- *Identities are codes that are expressed in conversations and define membership in communities.*
- *Identities are hierarchically ordered meanings attributed to self as an object in a social situation.*
- *Identities have semantic properties that are expressed in core symbols, meanings, and labels.*

There are also some CTI propositions are missing from the result of this study:

- *Identities are a source of expectations and motivations.*
- *Identities are emergent.*

Some of the CTI propositions are missing or can only be partly overserved in this study, however, it does not necessarily mean that these propositions do not exist in this case. Lack of visibilities can be resulted by the nature of CMC or the nature of the methodology, in which no direct contact with the forum users is made. Thus, detailed observation of the users' emotions is limited within the texts.

CTI has provided a good foundation for identity-related research. Hecht and his colleagues pointed out (Hecht, 1993, Hecht et al. 2005, Shin & Hecht, 2017), benefit from its layer-based nature, the framework has almost unlimited potential. On

the other hand, it is also acknowledged that additional adaptation may be required (Shin & Hecht, 2017).

Following the CTI propositions, researchers tend to focus on filling the blanks between different layers. However, one dimension has not yet been thoroughly discussed. Each layer of one's identity is also multi-faced. Identity gaps could exist in the same layer of individuals' identities (see 6.3).

Besides, with many studies discuss the gaps between different layers, it is also possible to identify how different layers are demonstrated at the same time. For example, in this study, many forum users would bring out different layers of their identities in order to justify or explain a same viewpoint (see 6.2). It would be valuable to study how different layers of identity could cooperate and potentially enhance each other.

#### **6.4. Limitation**

Although I consider studying the communication directly shows some additional potentials than studying the participants through a survey or interview, there are a few limitations that are worth mentioning.

First, my analysis may not accurately reflect the emotional reaction of the participants. Although texts include rich information, it is difficult to experience or understand the emotional status of participants during the encounter. On the other hand, if texts, as the basic medium of online forum communication, deliver mainly rational information, the emotions may not be significant, considering many of the replies happened days or even months later than the original posts. Same as myself,

the repliers do not accurately receive the emotion lies behind the original posts.

Second, as it has been criticized by some researchers (e.g. Atieno, 2009, Adair & Pastori, 2011), one of the biggest limitations of qualitative analysis is that the analysis may be affected by perspective and knowledge of the researcher. As it has been mentioned above, I am not a long-term user of The Witcher forum, some of the meaning deeply hidden behind certain words may be overlooked and can only be noticed by experienced users. Besides, the goal that drives the study is to bring CTI into CMC environment. It is possible that I was affected by the goal and focus more on the factors that prove the theory. I tried to be objective and avoid such bias, the possibility is however undeniably existing.

Additionally, although I have chosen one the most significant online platform for The Witcher players, it is still only one of many. All these platforms function differently and as time goes by, each community may have formed some unique platform culture, among which some may show different tendencies from my results. Besides, the moderators in this forum have been reported of being very active, many posts with the more emotional value may have been removed. Therefore, one needs to be careful when attempts to generalize the result to a larger group.

On the other hand, some propositions may be more obvious and accurate in this study. Because of the function and nature of the forum, researchers can study many layers of identities using the original field of communication. Thus, instead of achieving a thorough study on the identities in the forum, by conducting this study, I suggest that CMC environments and tools can be used in future CTI studies, in



addition to the traditional methods of surveys and interviews.

It is also important to bear in mind that not all CMC environments are the same. Different technologies would bring different features to the communication. Up to today, online forum may have been a comparatively old ground. With new technologies, more possibilities may yet to be explored in similar studies.

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