Article

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Disavowing 'That Guy': Identity construction and massively multiplayer online game players

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Abstract

Using Goffman's 'keys and frames' as an analytical framework, this article explores depictions of massively multiplayer online game (MMOG) players in newspaper coverage, popular media (*South Park* and *The Big Bang Theory*), and Web-based productions (*The Guild* and *Pure Pwnage*) and player reactions to these largely stereotypical portrayals. Following this discussion, we present data from a longitudinal study of MMOG players, focusing on our study's unintentional provoking of participants to react to (and ultimately reject) these stereotypes in their survey responses. We argue this is of particular interest to researchers studying MMOG players or members of other heavily satirized communities, as these stereotypes influence the ways study participants practice identity management and frame their own gaming practices, even in the context of an academic study that was explicitly *not* about addiction or the negative effects of digital game play.

Keywords

Identity management, massively multiplayer online games, MMOGs, players, stereotypes

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Introduction

> That Guy: The person everyone loves to hate and never wants to become. (Entry under 'That guy' in the *Urban Dictionary*)

> The tribal identification of the gamer ... is very stigmatizing.... People naturally think 'we don't want to be part of that tribe'. (Mike Capps, Entertainment Software Rating Board representative speaking at Game Developers Conference, Quoted in Nutt, 2013).

Video game players evoke a stereotypical image of a (White) male teen, likely overweight and socially awkward or isolated. This perception of the 'typical' video game player has remained quite fixed in popular culture, despite mounting evidence that it has little grounding in reality (Hayes, 2008). Academic research has continually found that not only are gamers more likely to be adults rather than teens (Griffiths et al., 2003; Williams et al., 2008) but games, especially the shared, collaborative worlds of massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) can be a site for positive social interaction (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Steinkuehler and Williams, 2005). Recognizing this disconnect between stereotype and reality, researchers have turned the focus on how gamers themselves feel about these popular portrayals of the typical gamer. Most recently, for instance, Kowert et al. (2012) have investigated stereotypes about MMOG players through an online survey asking gamers to interact with stereotypical terms associated (or not) with online game play.

In this article, we explore 'That Guy' – the stereotypical, socially awkward MMOG player. First, we overview the ways a variety of media has portrayed game players in a stereotypical manner and then we examine the way participants in a multiyear study of MMOGs invoked the That Guy stereotype in their responses to open-ended survey questions. While Kowert et al.'s survey required respondents to directly engage with MMOG-related stereotypes, participants in our study were asked relatively vague questions about their MMOG play (e.g. who they played with and what sort of activities they participated in while playing in online words). Upon examining the responses to open-ended survey questions, we were intrigued at the unusually high number of respondents who referenced or refuted negative stereotypes about MMOG players. We argue that our participants' voluntary reference to and engagement with these widely shared negative conceptions of 'MMOG gamers' indicate that these stereotypes are a pressing concern for the MMOG players in our study. Of particular interest is how participants, rather than describing the ways that *their own* play did or did not conform to stereotypes, described *other* MMOG players who appear to exhibit or embody the negative stereotypes associated with excessive online gaming – 'at least I'm not That Guy'. Never named or described in detail, the archetype of That Guy was frequently invoked in a way to normalize participants' own play. This article takes a preliminary step toward unpacking who we think That Guy is, how this fictionalized embodiment of the sum of the worst parts of online gaming culture has become so ingrained in MMOG player culture, and the ways in which this can affect MMOG research that involves human participants.

While Kowert et al. take a cognitive psychological approach to explore the degree to which stereotypes about online gaming are internalized and/or refuted, we employ Goffmans' (1975) work on 'keys and frames' as one way to approach how MMOG players negotiate their own identities in reaction and relation to negative portrayals in the media. We begin by presenting examples of representations of gamers that have appeared in news coverage, popular sitcoms, and other forms of entertainment media (e.g. Web shows). We use these as a standpoint to discuss the

ways in which some gamers make direct reference to negative stereotypes about MMOG players when asked to reflect on their own gameplay experiences. We then explore how gamers talk about their play to others, both within the community (through an analysis of a high-traffic Web forum) and to potential 'outsiders' (social scientist researchers involved in this study). Our observations of players' negotiation and then subsequent disavowal of the That Guy archetype illustrate how the pervasive negativity that surrounds MMOG play – which is continually reproduced in a variety of cultural productions – is instrumental to some gamers in actively managing their identity.

Theoretical framework

Consalvo (2009) argues that Fine's (1983) modification of Goffman's (1975) 'keys and frames' to research the players of tabletop role-playing games provides the theoretical tools for game scholars to better understand and acknowledge a larger context in which digital games are played. For the purposes of this work, we extend Consalvo's argument beyond play that is observed within a virtual game world to larger conversations about perceptions of gaming culture, especially in situations where MMOG players must choose if they will publicly identify themselves as a gamer, what information about their play practices will be shared, and if they trust the person this information will be disclosed to.

Turning to Goffman, keys and frames are a way to describe how understandings of 'reality' can be used to infuse meaning into other 'artificial' situations. A frame, for example, is a means of organizing experience – in this case, the 'everyday' realities of players. Keying refers to:

> The set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by participants as being something quite else. (Goffman, 1975: 43–44)

This article argues that online game play has been continually framed through media as a suspect act, one that leads to an unhealthy, undesirable lifestyle (e.g. computer or Internet addiction, weight gain, and poor hygiene) with negative consequences (e.g. unemployment, lack of social interaction, and remaining romantically unattached). We argue that when That Guy is invoked without specific prompting, it is because players are reacting to how MMOG play is framed in an overwhelmingly negative manner within a larger cultural context.

Using MMOGS in research: Reporting the 'facts'

As fully functional online worlds in which thousands of players interact, MMOGs have many qualities that are attractive to researchers from a wide variety of disciplines. For example, computer scientists have tracked the way that game data travels to learn how to create more efficient and faster network connections allowing even more users to connect simultaneously (Cai et al., 2010; Che and Ip, 2012; Chen et al., 2006). Researchers of communicable diseases have used MMOGs to simulate how quickly a virtual plague moves through a large population of avatars with no risk to an individual's physical health (Balicer, 2007; Boman and Johansson, 2007; Kafai et al., 2010; Lofgren and Fefferman, 2007; Neulight and Kafai, 2005). Most MMOGs have a developer-sanctioned in-game economy reliant on player-to-player trading. The study of these in-game economies has been fruitful for research about economic decision making (Castronova, 2003, 2005; Castronova et al., 2009) as well as work on how black or gray markets are formed and how these illegal or semi-illegal trade networks are maintained (Ahmad et al., 2010, 2011; Dibbell,

2006; Keegan et al., 2011; Lastowka, 2010; White, 2008). Many of these studies could have been completed with varying degrees of success using computer simulations that model human decision-making patterns. But, unlike using a computer simulation, research within an MMOG allows data to be collected that reflects the actions of thousands of *actual* people interacting in a virtual microcosm that is modeled on social structures found in the off-line world.

Another large body of academic work examines the motivations of why some players choose to play MMOGs. These studies are typically based in psychology and often investigate issues of addiction or perceived negative impacts of game play. Liu and Peng (2009: 1306) summarize this addiction-based research through three broad 'negative life consequences associated with MMOG playing':

> Physical problems (i.e. fatigue, physical pain, reducing sleep time, skipping meals), personal life problems (i.e. conflicts with friends or family, low social engagement, decreased time management skills), and professional/academic problems (i.e. missing work or school, deteriorated performance).

Many of these studies assume a taken-for-granted 'truth' that playing an MMOG will have a negative effect on their participants, and yet their analyses and conclusions frequently are not able to support this claim (see e.g. Decker and Gay, 2011; Liu and Peng, 2009; Stetina et al., 2011). In their review of studies of both gaming and broader Internet use, Shen and Williams (2011) draw attention to how their own study has seemingly produced conflicting results about whether gaming was a prosocial or antisocial activity, depending on which way they chose to interpret their data. This leads Shen and Williams to argue for a greater focus on the contexts in which MMOGs are played; in this case, we argue for a need to move beyond the fictional basement man cave that is occupied by the imaginary That Guy.

While scholarly investigations of the negative effects of game play are couched in explanations of study limitations and scope, the findings of this research may still be selectively quoted to provide shock value by tabloid-style reporting on the subject. A particularly sensational example of this sort of investigative journalism on games was recently analyzed by Dutton et al. (2011). In their study of fan reactions to adverse claims being made about *Mass Effect* (a sci-fi role-playing/shooter game), Dutton et al. describe how Cooper Lawrence, a pop psychologist, refers to 'A University of Maryland study',[1] which argues teenage boys cannot tell the difference between video games and reality under certain circumstances, using this to support her claim that playing this particular game will inevitably result in violent behaviors and/or the objectification of women (2011: 290–291). In response to what they saw as an unfair demonization of *Mass Effect* (and its community of players), fans countered with an online campaign to discredit Lawrence. This 'Fox News debacle' is an extreme example of the ongoing negotiation and confrontations between gamers and reporters about how video games 'should' be portrayed in the media. In the next section, we examine recent media reporting on MMOGs and their players. Perhaps unsurprising, this reporting is predominantly focused on the antisocial effects of game play.

MMOGs in the news

Positive portrayals of gaming appear in the mainstream news media, such as a recent article about seniors playing *World of Warcraft* (Visser, n.d.) that reports on a potential link between MMOG play and cognitive benefits for the elderly. However, reports on the positive and productive potentials of gaming are eclipsed by an overwhelming amount of coverage that remains focused on the perceived negative effects of online game play. Speculation surrounding the negative

influences (or outcomes) of playing video games can become the focus of the reporting on topics unrelated to gaming if a key figure in a story is 'discovered' to be a gamer. Recent examples of the shifting focus of a news story involving an MMOG gamer can be seen in reports about a Canadian naval intelligence officer accused of espionage. Upon discovery that he participated in an online gaming community, reporting began to shift away from his suspected spying to sensationalized accounts of his MMOG play, complete with accusations that he was living a fantastical second life online and that he suffered from computer and video game addiction (Chase et al., 2012). Similarly, a candidate in a 2012 US election was discovered to be a *World of Warcraft* player. Information about her avatar – an orc rogue – was used by her opponent in an attempt to discredit her, arguing that her preference for violent game play would make her 'unfit' to govern (Johnson, 2012; O'Neil, 2012). This kind of reporting is even more alarmist in tone when it concerns children, frequently claiming that video game addiction is eroding the line between reality and 'fantasy'. Headlines that state 'Children becoming addicted to video game fantasy worlds, teachers warn' (Shepherd, 2012) and 'Kids around the world becoming addicted to video games' (Kesterton, 2011) frame video games as a negative activity, *especially* for highly impressionable youth. This melodramatic reporting works to reinforce the idea that video game play is synonymous with deviance and possibly leads to criminal behavior. When reporting on games remains overly focused on the negative, it can contribute to a context in which there is an assumption that MMOG players are already always being judged by nongamers, even in settings where game play would otherwise be a neutral or positive activity. Since our study participants live their day-to-day lives in a mediated environment that frames gaming as suspect, it is understandable that our survey invoked defensive reactions.

To better understand the wider culture in which our study participants may experience MMOGs framed negatively in their day-to-day lives, we investigated the way *World of Warcraft*, currently the most successful MMOG on the market, has been reported on by mainstream English-language print media. After downloading newspaper headlines for all articles mentioning *World of Warcraft* appearing in the LexisNexis database between August 2011 and August 2012 and removing duplicate items, the data set consisted of 477 headlines that were then coded according to the primary subject of the report. Over this 12-month period, we observe two large clusters of articles that either relied on attention-grabbing headlines and/or speculated about the harmful effects of MMOG play. Specifically, these clusters contain articles tightly focused around two events, namely, the April 2012 trial of Anders Breivik, charged with the murder of 77 people in Norway, and the July 2012 mass shooting in Aurora, Colorado, and the subsequent arrest of James Holmes. Both tragedies involved a lone gunman opening fire on a crowd, and the mental well-being of both perpetrators has been publicly discussed and debated. Investigation into the lives of the accused have uncovered that both men had previously played video games, including *World of Warcraft*. Both events led to a series of attention-grabbing headlines that speculated about the reasons that these gunmen decided to orchestrate their attacks. Finally, in both cases, reporters use the suspects' avid *World of Warcraft* play as evidence of the mental instability of the accused.

With headlines that are sensational and negative, it is unsurprising that the content of many of these articles are equally negative in tone about video game play, portraying games, especially MMOGs like *World of Warcraft*, as an addictive fantasy world populated by social deviants. For example, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, a sociology professor at Oslo University who was called as an expert witness for Breivik's defense, quoted on the accused's *World of Warcraft* play:

> I think one factor which hasn't been taken sufficiently into account is his [Breivik's] obsession with a certain kind of computer game and his way of using the Internet in order to create for himself a kind of alternative reality. . . . He does not seem to be very successful in distinguishing between the virtual reality of *World of Warcraft* and other computer games, and reality. (Anders Breivik 'unable to distinguish reality' says professor, 2012)

In the case of the Aurora mass shooting, only a few descriptions of Holmes' private life have been made public, but these descriptions include comparisons of the games played by Holmes and Breivik. Details of Holmes' game play are included in the body of articles; for example, an article appearing in the *Daily Mail* (London, UK) is focused primarily on Holmes' digital footprints, describing his profiles on Adultfriendfinder.com and Match.com, but makes a comment about the commonality between Holmes and Breivik:

> Like the Norwegian killer Anders Breivik, Holmes was a devotee of violent computer games, particularly the hugely popular fantasy game *World of Warcraft*, which could only have strengthened his detachment from the real world. (Behind The Dead-Eye Mask Of The Batman Maniac, 2012)

Despite both men planning their criminal activities in isolation and having no previous contact with each other, the similarity most frequently invoked is that they both played *World of Warcraft* and that this is somehow at least partly to blame for both crimes.

A common theme running through these articles and headlines is the implication that video games are at least partially responsible for these tragedies. The ways in which newspaper headlines can be used to frame public understanding of certain issues have been well established by communication scholars. For example, Franiuk et al. (2008) found that headlines can not only help perpetuate myths about rape but also shift reader sympathy away from the victim and toward the accused rapist. In terms of framing conversations surrounding video games in the media, Squire (2002) observed that these conversations seem to remain overly focused on violence. This, according to Squire, creates an artificially narrow public discussion about the possibilities – especially educational possibilities – of video game play. In our own study, we see much of the same issues that Squire wrote of being reinforced by newspaper headlines, even though more than 10 years have since passed. We now turn our attention to popular, fictional portrayals of gamers, specifically MMOG gamers, to reveal the ways in which these games and players are portrayed in other cultural productions. While questions of violence are largely unaddressed in the fictional portrayals selected for this article, we argue that much like the newspaper coverage of *World of Warcraft* works to overwhelmingly frame MMOGs in a negative light, when MMOG gaming is represented in fiction, an equally negative stereotype is portrayed.

Fictional portrayals of MMOG gamers

> I'm just another lonely nerd, living with his mother, trying to find any scrap of happiness he can. (Howard Wolowitz. *The Big Bang Theory*, 'The Killer Robot Instability', S2.E12, January 12, 2009)

> President Blizzard: I don't have a World of Warcraft account, do you? Member 1: No, I have a life. (Parody of discussion between Blizzard Entertainment Employees, *South Park*, 'Make Love Not Warcraft', S10.E8, October 4, 2006)

The debut appearance of *World of Warcraft* in popular media was the 2006 *South Park*[2] episode 'Make Love, Not Warcraft'. Prior to its airing, MMOG players (and video game players generally)

were rarely featured so prominently in popular media, except as part of crime dramas such as *Crime Scene Investigation*, *Law & Order*, or *Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS)*. These crime dramas continue to portray MMOG gamers in a similar manner to the headlines mentioned in the previous section, namely, violent, mentally unstable, and predisposed toward committing illegal acts. This genre generally portrays MMOG players as White, overweight males who are addicted to their virtual world of choice and ignore their off-line responsibilities.[3] When female MMOG players are depicted, they were likely to be portrayed neglecting their children in order to escape their domestic 'prison' and attend to their online fantasy life.

In contrast to these dramatic portrayals of MMOG gamers as criminals, what was aired on October 4, 2006 episode of *South Park* was a parody of *World of Warcraft* and its players that did not make reference to violent behaviors. With Blizzard Entertainment supporting the airing of this breakthrough episode, 'Make Love, Not Warcraft' featured fully rendered scenes of the game play and showed the four main characters of the show devolving into the 'unhealthy' lifestyle of That Guy who is described as 'that[4] which has … absolutely no life'. During their obsessive game play, the boys become overweight, ignore basic hygiene requirements, and confine themselves to a basement hideaway. *South Park* has a long history of boundary pushing for the sake of humor and social commentary, so when viewed in context with other episodes of the long-running series, their characterization of *World of Warcraft* and its players as exaggerated versions of commonly held MMOG stereotypes does not seem particularly out of the ordinary in this context.

If grossly exaggerated representations are common (and perhaps even expected) in M-rated programming like *South Park*, what about television (TV) shows that are *not* known for boundary pushing and overt social commentary? For this, we look at *The Big Bang Theory*, a popular sitcom that currently sits in the top 10 of American TV ratings. The show has been praised for making geek culture trendy, with journalists suggesting that the popularity of the show has contributed to the increased enrollment in university physics courses (Townsend, 2011). *The Big Bang Theory*, an ensemble cast sitcom, centers on Sheldon and Leonard, two male research scientists who share an apartment in Pasadena, California. Leonard is considered to be the less socially awkward of the two, but his character still embodies many common 'nerd' tropes; he wears black thick-rimmed glasses, collects comic books and other paraphernalia, attends sci-fi conventions in a full *Star Trek* uniform, becomes tongue-tied around women he finds attractive, and so on. The marker for 'normal' in *The Big Bang Theory* is Penny, Sheldon and Leonard's female neighbor who lives across the hall. Unlike the majority of the other characters, who work at the California Institute of Technology as research scientists or engineers, Penny is an underpaid waitress and an aspiring actress.

At the time of writing, MMOGs have featured as major plot elements in two separate episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*. In 'The Barbarian Sublimation' (S2.E3, originally aired October 6, 2008), Sheldon introduces Penny to *Age of Conan*, an MMOG set in the universe of Robert E Howard's *Conan the Barbarian*. While Sheldon seems to be enjoying playing this game in moderation, Penny quickly becomes obsessed with the MMOG after having an incredibly bad day. Her insatiable desire to play is motivated by her dissatisfaction with her off-line life, specifically her stalled acting career and lack of dating success. As she progresses through the game, she stops paying attention to her appearance and eventually we only see her surrounded by energy drinks, wearing oversized, food-stained tracksuits, unkempt hair and makeup, with a fine dusting of Cheetos powder on her face. At the end of the episode, Penny is finally 'shocked' back to reality, stating 'Oh my god, I need help' after discovering her new in-game romantic interest is actually Howard, a friend and colleague of Leonard and Sheldon, and someone who Penny has repeatedly rejected in real life, including at the beginning of the very episode! The second MMOG-centric episode ('The

Zarnecki Incursion', S4.E19, originally aired March 11, 2011) focuses on Sheldon's *World of Warcraft* account being hacked, and all of his weapons and armor being stolen. It is revealed that all of the male characters are avid *World of Warcraft* players. Once again MMOGs are presented as an escapist fantasy world, with Leonard's girlfriend Priya eventually presenting an ultimatum, that is, he must choose between *World of Warcraft* and their relationship.

While *South Park* is known for its sarcastic social critiques and boundary pushing, *The Big Bang Theory* has been celebrated for its relatively positive portrayals of the nerd community. Viewers are compelled to see the main characters as leading regular lives, and like many ensemble cast sitcoms, plots often focus around romantic entanglements. It is intriguing that the main characters' identities as scientists and engineers who spend unusually long hours in a male-dominated space (the labs of Caltech) and rarely socialize outside their closed circle of friends is *not* positioned as detrimental to their romantic lives. Instead, it is their socially marginal hobbies and leisure activities that have the most direct, negative impacts on their love lives. In this case, MMOGs and sex are presented as mutually exclusive activities and participation in one precludes any sort of engagement with the other. This is made clear in 'The Barbarian Sublimation', as the audience views Penny losing her sexual appeal as she plays *Age of Conan*. Penny goes from being an attractive and highly social female that is 'out of their league' to an object of Leonard's pity and subject of an intervention regarding her drastic fall in social status and sexual desirability:

LEONARD: Here's the thing. Sometimes people, good people, they start playing these games, and they find themselves – through no fault of their own – you know, kind of addicted.
PENNY: Yeah, get to the point. I'm about to level up here.
LEONARD: It's just if a person doesn't have a sense of achievement in their real life, it's easy to lose themselves in a virtual world where they can get a false sense of accomplishment.
PENNY: Yeah, jabber, jabber, jabber. Okay, boys, Queen Penelope's back online.
LEONARD: Penny … you've got Cheetos in your hair.
PENNY: Thanks! (*plucks the Cheetos out and eats it*)

Here MMOGs are portrayed as being highly addictive, so much that 'good people', including a normal person like Penny is susceptible to an MMOG's spell, losing basic social skills such as having a conversation with a friend (nicely summarized in Penny's response to Leonard's concerns, 'Yeah, jabber, jabber, jabber') as well any interest in presenting oneself as sexually desirable (e.g. snacking on Cheetos she found in her hair).

While it is implied that all of the male characters in *The Big Bang Theory* play MMOGs, references to these games only become part of the plot when put in opposition to sex. In 'The Zarnecki Incursion' episode, for instance, MMOG play is set up as being against the norm, as Leonard's girlfriend Priya becomes irritated watching him 'play' *World of Warcraft*, sarcastically telling him, 'I always wanted to date a boy trapped in a man's body'. Priya voices an opinion that is repeated so often that it has become transformed into a kind of universal, taken-for-granted truth about players; playing MMOGs is a childish activity reserved for those who are sexless and dissatisfied with reality, exemplified by the recently dejected Penny, the intentionally celibate Sheldon, and the hopelessly pathetic Howard. The lack of a sex life in *The Big Bang Theory* is based on the presumption that MMOG players are all immature, either children playing a game or adults who refuse to grow up ('boy in a man's body'). In earlier seasons of *The Big Bang Theory*, for instance, a central tenet of Howard's character is that he lives at home voluntarily with his overbearing mother. This positions him as a sexually immature male who can devote time to playing

MMOGs because living with his mother alleviates him of typical adult responsibilities.[5] Howard's sexual immaturity and inexperience is frequently referenced for the sake of humor, and the idea of being romantically entangled with Howard is *so* repulsive to normal people that the mere consideration of going on a virtual date with him is what causes Penny to quit playing right there on the spot.

In sum, while Leonard and his friends are visually portrayed as young and hip instead of the typical 'old man with unkempt hair and white lab coat' scientist trope (Carr et al., 2009), the writers rely on negative stereotypes of other related groups – that is, MMOG players – to normalize the scientists featured on the show. Without opportunities to show the complexities or even different contexts of play, it can be difficult to challenge or change the widely held negative perceptions of MMOG players. These stereotypical portrayals, combined with the negative news headlines discussed previously, are two easily observable ways that MMOGs are framed as being a socially deviant activity.

Web-based shows featuring MMOG players

With the stereotypical gamer so firmly entrenched in mainstream TV productions, perhaps independent media made by gamers for gamers not necessarily constrained by the 22-min prime time TV format may provide more 'well-rounded' representations. To our surprise, Web-based media purposely targeted at the gaming community, specifically *The Guild* (a fictional show following an MMOG guild) and *Pure Pwnage* (a fictional reality show following a semiprofessional First Person Shooter (FPS) player), we find they still rely on many of the same stereotypes found in *South Park* or *The Big Bang Theory* (e.g. main characters who are awkward, socially stunted recluses that are unable to cope with their off-line lives).

Despite both productions being specifically marketed toward gamers, *The Guild* features a cast of characters that embody the so-called negative effects of MMOG gaming. This includes 'Herman Holden/Vork', the guild leader whose social phobias cause him to stay inside and minimize face-to-face interactions with new people, and 'Clara Beane/Clara', the obese and negligent mother who barricades her young children out of reach of her computer so they cannot interfere with her game play. In the case of *Pure Pwnage*, the protagonist (Jeremy/teh_pwnerer) is a semiprofessional FPS player who frequently vocalizes his disdain for MMOG players but secretly begins to play *World of Warcraft* to spend time with his new love interest. Quickly becoming addicted, Jeremy eschews all responsibilities and social obligations for the sake of the MMOG and is soon admitted to a treatment center, as he can no longer tell the difference between reality and the game world. Despite Jeremy demonstrating similar addictive traits in his FPS play, the writers chose only to highlight his game play as being out of control when he starts playing *World of Warcraft*, producing similar story arcs as described previously in *South* Park and *The Big Bang Theory*.

Both *The Guild* and *Pure Pwnage* are fictional shows that are filmed using techniques commonly used in reality TV. For example, the main character of *The Guild*, 'Cyd Sherman/Codex', frequently breaks the fourth wall and talks to the audience about her insecurities through a 'confessional camera', and the premise of *Pure Pwnage* is that Jeremy and his team are being 'followed' by a camera crew making a documentary about their lives as semiprofessional FPS players. These stylistic choices contribute a degree of authenticity to this framing of MMOG play. *The Guild* and *Pure Pwnage* are caricatures of gamer subcultures and present a view into a make-believe world with their protagonists struggling to fully integrate with the rest of the off-line world. Being fictional depictions of gamers and game play, written and produced by self-described

gamers, it seems like there should be the possibility for well-rounded depiction of gamers. What is shown instead is a portrait of MMOG players that is overly reliant on the tropes and stereotypes already well used in mainstream media productions. Addiction, social phobias, and child neglect are presented as being the norm among MMOG players – even on shows that purport to be 'for gamers'. Even if these exaggerated stereotypes are presented for the sake of humor, this still works to firmly entrench the idea that playing MMOGs is something to be ashamed of. Just as we argued that news reporting on MMOG players often paint this sort of game play as a socially deviant activity, we argue that the fictional depictions of MMOG players reinforce similar negative messages about this genre of game and its players. We will now present two examples that illustrate ways in which MMOG players internalize these negative depictions and respond to these depictions in a defensive manner.

'At least I'm not "That Guy"'

The first part of this article has focused on negative depictions of gamers in news reports and popular media. This section discusses the ways in which gamers react to these depictions. Of particular importance is how these overwhelmingly negative reactions are concerned with a perceived stigma attached to engaging in MMOG play and culture. We interpret this notion of a broader cultural invocation or 'social stigma' associated with MMOG gaming as evidence of some of the ways gamers have internalized the negative stereotypes associated with MMOGs that are frequently depicted in news reporting and other forms of media, such as sitcoms or Web-based serials. Here we draw on two sources of data written by MMOG players that make direct reference to concerns of being mistaken for That Guy, namely, reactions to the Summer 2010 decision by Blizzard Entertainment to identify all *Starcraft* and *World of Warcraft* players by their legal name (instead of avatar name) on the publicly accessible online forum and survey data from a longitudinal multisite study that examined whether and how players' off-line characteristics are recognizable in their online interactions in MMOGs. These forum postings and survey responses, written by self-described gamers, illustrate the ways in which players invoke and then position themselves in opposition to That Guy. Recalling our earlier discussion of Goffman, here we use keying as a means of explaining the invocation of That Guy in situations that do not readily seem to be casting judgment on one's gaming habits, specifically, an attempt to improve community relations by encouraging players to refer to each other by their legal names on the *Blizzard* official forums and our survey that had been designed with the intention to *avoid* such negative assumptions about MMOG play

Web-based discussion forums

An example of the widely held belief among gamers that a social stigma is associated with MMOG play is revealed by the controversies surrounding 'Real ID'. In July 2010, Blizzard Entertainment announced changes to the way posters would be identified when participating in online discussions as part of their official forums. Citing this change as a means to both reduce trolling and abusive behavior on the forums and encourage off-line connections among players, all posts would now be associated with one's real-world name and e-mail address (otherwise known as their Real ID). The reactions to this press release were overwhelmingly negative, and when the forum thread announcing the impending change was finally closed to further comments, it had over 1300 pages of responses.

After a few days of negative press and thousands of angry posts on the official forums, Blizzard backed down and announced that they would no longer be pursuing Real ID as a means of identifying forum participants. The aftermath of Blizzard's quickly revised decision to identify all forum posters by their real names is discussed by Albrechtslund (2011) who analyzed the content of two threads where *World of Warcraft* players voiced concerns about the change. Of particular interest are Albrechtslund's investigations surrounding players' resistance to *World of Warcraft* becoming too much like Facebook. There is a sentiment in the threads that games such as *World of Warcraft* are played to be an escape, rather than make new friends and expand one's social network. Many posts characterized play as a separate sphere, detached from all other parts of their life. Albrechtslund notes that this finding (that players prioritized a separation between 'game time' and 'real life') is in contest with previous research findings on social networks within MMOGs, including Nardi's (2010) finding that many *World of Warcraft* players know and call each other by their real-life names or the ways in which MMOGs can be used as a site of shared leisure time for romantic couples (Bergstrom, 2010; Carr and Oliver, 2009) or families (Shen and Williams, 2011). Indeed, the prevailing sentiment on the forum was that being forced to use one's real name was unwelcome and even threatening to their off-line lives/identities.

In our investigation of the reactionary discussion threads, we found multiple instances where players expressed concerns about the potential negative consequences of having their legal name tied to their *World of Warcraft* character. These concerns echoed the broader social stigma surrounding MMOG gaming that we have detailed from news media and popular TV programming. For example, this post wrote about the potential negative repercussions for romance and employment:

> Awesome, so now when a chick I'm interested in decides to Google me, she'll find my closet-gamer habit. Then there are potential employers. . . . Thanks! That's awesome! No more hiding it from real life. This is EXACTLY what I wanted . . . another Facebook.

Another post elaborated on the stigma of MMOG gaming preventing employment:

> Trust me, I too would very much enjoy being able to game with the people around me . . . but that isn't the culture I live in. Many respective employers would look down on those habits as would quite a few associates. Putting my real name on my character would never make them respect my hobbies. And as such, unless you are a programmer or directly involved in the game world, this may or may not hurt you much more than it helps you.

This sentiment was echoed in multiple posts and threads, carrying with it the assumption that nonplayers, MMOGs, and the people who play them are held in very low regard, which is reinforced through depictions of relationships between nongamers and gamers in popular media discussed previously in this article. The reactions to the proposed changes to the official Blizzard forums, we argue, might be interpreted as concerns about privacy, but when read alongside survey responses collected in an academic research context, there seemed to be more at stake here.

Contextual responses: Disavowing That Guy in surveys

As the debate continues on whether or not game play has positive or negative outcomes, there have never been more opportunities for MMOG players to speak with researchers and co-construct knowledge about a culture in which they are involved. Between 2009 and 2012, new and current MMOG players were invited to participate in a research study that asked whether and how a player's off-line

characteristics could be determined by virtue of their online play. Participants were recruited for a lab-based study or took part in studies conducted on-site at LANs and other gaming-related events.[6] As part of data collection, participants were asked to identify the elements of their game play that they felt were the most relevant and interesting, acting as a sort of barometer for identifying issues that were significant enough for participants to raise with researchers. After explaining how confidentiality would be maintained throughout the study, we asked participants to read through and sign the informed consent documents. We then provided each participant with an individual anonymized token that would be used to identify the participant (to researchers) throughout the study. We describe this process to reinforce that confidentiality was assured and that concerns about privacy issues do not fully account for how participants responded to particular survey questions.

The survey participants ($N = 215$) were asked a variety of questions pertaining to their play habits, including demographic information and questions about what games they currently play and with whom they play. When reviewing survey data, paying particular attention to where, when, and why participants voluntarily provided additional information about their play, two questions in particular seemed to elicit strong reactions/references to the That Guy stereotype: (1) 'What is stopping you from spending more time in your virtual world'? and (2) An open-ended question at the end of the survey, 'Is there anything that you would like to add or comment on?' Of the responses to the first question, mentions of either school ($N = 56$) and/or work ($N = 53$) were the most frequent responses. Considering that many participants were recruited from a university campus, these results are not particularly surprising.

Of more significant interest is a subset of respondents who voluntarily chose to provide additional information and contextualize their answer. Here, respondents would frequently make references specifically to *off-line* friends and/or an *off-line* romantic partner as reasons why they don't spend more time playing ($N = 23$). One pattern we consistently saw in these responses was that participants would talk positively about their participation in online gaming but then almost immediately pull back or tone down their statements, perhaps so we wouldn't interpret their enthusiasm as evidence of being That Guy. The first part of the response would mention a positive feature of MMOG play such as (1) a fun, enjoyable, and (relatively) safe leisure activity, (2) a means for developing and also maintaining friendships or relationships, and (3) contributes to the development of desirable real-world skills such as 'leadership' or 'team player' by providing tangible experience. The latter part of the response, however, often contained a reference to the 'real world', which they positioned as an anchor or way to keep 'grounded' and not get lost in the addictive fun that virtual worlds offer, for example:

R1: I could easily spend a lot of time in virtual worlds because they are very fun. Luckily, I have extremely hard ties to the things I do in the real world and therefore am never able to get too far in. *World of Warcraft* was the toughest to get out of, but even then I only really spent about 6 months of solid gaming in that world, and those 6 months weren't consecutive. I'm excited to take part in the study, but am worried that playing *World of Warcraft* will make me want to start playing again.

R2: For me I enjoy video games. I find it a great way to interact with friends/family (sister) with whom you may not necessarily be able to hang out with otherwise due to living in different cities. I feel that society has a negative view on playing too many video games and this in turn makes me want to play less. I feel overall that while I can be very hardcore and spend lots of time on video games I am able to control myself in the sense that I will put real life tasks/friends first.

R3: I play every so often, its fun, but I value my real life over a virtual world.

R4: I like playing *World of Warcraft* but it is not the only thing I like to do. I have other friends and I have a job.

We feel that these references to real-world friends and partners (i.e. R2 and R4) are another way that participants positioned themselves as *not* That Guy who is typically constructed as incapable of social interaction or maintaining social relationships in the real world. These real-world relationships became the 'social anchor' that kept players from losing themselves to the virtual world (i.e. R1 and R3).

Participants also rehearsed the stereotypes of MMOG players that we have described in this article, but those were never used in reference to their own play. Instead, stereotypes were used to describe *other* MMOG players (i.e. R5 below). These responses revolved around the assumption that MMOG play is addictive, unhealthy, time consuming, and can lure players away from 'real' life, real friends, and the real world, in general (very much like Leonard's intervention speech to Penny). However, participants continually reinforced to researchers that their own MMOG play was *not* any of these things, as their own self-control and their myriad of real-world social ties prevented them from being susceptible to the addictive, unhealthy, or time-consuming qualities associated with MMOGs. For example:

R5: I think that a lot of people out there really do live almost entirely online. I've met and interacted with some of these people and they generally lead a quiet, unassuming life but online they become someone new, someone they want to be. They feel that this is a world that they can master and control.

Stanfill (2013) describes a similar phenomenon observed in his interviews with fans of the TV series *Xena: Warrior Princess*, where participants agreed with negative portrayals of *Xena* fans as accurate but refused to take on that meaning for themselves, 'instead bracketing themselves out of it and shifting it off onto others' (p. 117). We find Goffman useful on multiple levels for interpretation of these unexpected survey results. At no point in our recruitment did we suggest that we were interested in the negative aspects of MMOG play, and yet, many survey responses were crafted as a defense of and/or justification for their participation in a particular online gaming community. We argue that through a consistent framing of MMOG players by news and other forms of media as socially inept deviants and addicts, this framing primes many players to anticipate judgment and negative assumptions about their play practices. When unprovoked responses such as 'I have a life and am very social with friends and my girlfriend' or 'I have to eat, sleep and go to school and have sex with my boyfriend' are viewed in conjunction with the popular media stereotype of an MMOG player being a loser who is incapable of forming or maintaining social relationships outside of a game world, we interpret these impulsive references to off-line friendships and romantic attachments as a means for signaling to the researchers that they may play MMOGs, but they are not to be mistaken for That Guy who as illustrated by the examples discussed throughout this article does not have a particularly vibrant social or romantic life. We find keying to be a useful interpretive framework to think about the ways that the survey, something we ourselves understood as a research tool, could be appropriated by study participants as their own tool to acknowledge the existence of and ultimately disavow any connection to That Guy. That the survey elicited these kinds of responses is also indicative of game play being something that is marginalized in popular cultural terms, even as it attracts new audiences and new players.

Conclusions

> Think about how 'gamers' – the people we study and educate – are often portrayed in the media. White young males playing FPS, eating Doritos, drinking Mountain Dew, and spewing homophobic comments over the anonymity of the Internet. The gamer is suspect. What have we done to change that? (Miguel Sicart, 2013, Game Educator's Rant, Game Developers Conference)

It is clear that at least in our participant pool, the players we encountered understand that MMOG play is framed in a larger cultural context as an antisocial, potentially harmful, addictive hobby. That as researchers we unintentionally prompted players to reframe themselves as '*not* That Guy' is significant in a study where we had not in any way indicated that we were intending to make judgments about whether or not certain playing habits constituted addiction or in any other way were cast as unhealthy or socially deviant. That players sought out opportunities within the survey to indicate, sometimes in the strongest possible terms, that they like playing games but that they had balanced lives that included exercise, friends, and romantic partnerships was revealing especially in light of the ways in which the media reports on and 'plays' with gamer identities. Through a reflection on the ways that MMOG play is depicted across multiple media what we have attempted to show here is precisely the ways in which media and TV opportunistically and shallowly make use of a gamer identity that does not reflect the lived practices and lives of the so-called 'typical gamer'. It is through our unintentional provoking of study participants to distance themselves That Guy that we became aware of just how strongly these stereotypes and misconceptions are engrained in the everyday lives of MMOG players. While game studies has matured into a field that can look past these stereotypes and position MMOGs as a venue for positive social interaction, it is hoped that this article has drawn attention to the fact that this hospitality is not necessarily present in the lived realities of the gamers we study. It may well be that paying insufficient attention to the wider contexts of participants' lives, as researchers we may inadvertently be blinding ourselves to the stories our participants are attempting to share about their negotiations and renegotiations between stereotypical media portrayals and their own everyday lived realities as MMOG gamers.

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Notes

1. While this 'University of Maryland' study is not specifically cited by Dutton et al., we suspect that Lawrence is referencing Travers (2008), a summary article published in *The University of Maryland McNair Scholars Undergraduate Research Journal.*
2. Intended for mature audiences, *South Park* has become famous for its crude language and dark, surreal humor that lampoons a wide range of topics. The ongoing narrative revolves around four middle school boys and their bizarre adventures in and around their Colorado town.
3. Such as homicide by negligence, as seen in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* S12.E2 episode 'Bullseye' originally aired on September 22, 2010.
4. The use of 'that' instead of 'who' to describe That Guy here might be intentional, implying that the player is so far removed from society that he is no longer even considered a person.
5. Another possible implication is that Howard's sexual immaturity stems from an unresolved Oedipal complex. For the first six seasons, Howard lives at home with his mother, who cooks, cleans, and generally

takes care of him. Even when Howard gets married and officially 'moves out', their strong primordial relationship results in him and his wife spending several nights a week at his mother's house.

6. A description of the lab-based study protocol can be found in Jenson et al. (2013), and the LAN study protocol is detailed by Taylor et al. (2014).

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