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A socio-cultural approach of identity performances in virtual worlds

Doctoral thesis

Summary

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Small dictionary of terms used in virtual worlds

The interview guide

Keywords: *online identity, identity performance, online games, ethnicity, nationalism, gender, digital culture.*

In 2009, the TV channel Antena 3 broadcasts a special coverage regarding the video games' influences on child's behavior. The coverage, titled "Online Agressivity in Romania: `Video Games are not Babysitters", presents psychologists, game developers and police officers debating about the video games influence on children. Moreover, the coverage emphasizes the link between video games and aggressive behavior by presenting how games have changed and how they have led to changes into children' socializing process. The age groups of gamers are arbitrarily merged ("the young", "the children") and gamers' position with regard to the negative influences mentioned above is lacking, thus the coverage perpetuates a stereotypical, negative image of gamers: "You are heading toward the building and, through the ground floor windows, you can see how a focused young man plays his new video game. It's trendy, they say. When he wins a gold medal at the illegal racing championship, you can hear a scream of happiness coming from his room. From the same building, a loud shot is heard. Screams of happiness follow the accomplished quota of virtual killings. (...) Back in the year 2000, children used to take a walk in the park, ride a bike or play cards, while the extreme passion for video games, computers or play stations was well hidden behind trees." ¹

Considering that this thesis is not a psychology-related research, the author does not intend to develop theories of addiction and deviant/violent behavior correlated with video games' consumption. However, understanding violent behavior by reducing its developmental characteristics to the consumption of video games represents, in my opinion, a reductionist theoretical position, as all the social, economic, familial and cultural factors that also influence the development of this type of behavior are ignored. In his essay, "Reality Bytes: Eight Myths about Video Games Debunked" (n.d.), Henry Jenkins² deconstructs the myths of the negative influence exerted by video games on users' attitudes and behaviors. Jenkins argues that, despite the moral panic over the causal relationship between exposure to virtual violence in video games and development of violent/aggressive behavior of youth (children and adolescents, alike), the studies embracing this theoretical strand are inconclusive, as the results reveal at most a correlation between the two elements. Therefore, a stable mental state

¹ <http://www.antena3.ro/romania/agresivitatea-online-faza-pe-romania-jocurile-video-nu-sunt-o-dadaca-pentru-copii-82070.html#>

² <http://www.pbs.org/kcts/videogamerevolution/impact/myths.html>

and the quality of the family life are the two main factors which prevail in the development of an anti-social behavior and escalating acts of violence against others. Additionally, the social isolation of gamers - another myth built around the effects of video games – is counter argued by Jenkins, who points out that the gaming sessions are socializing processes among gamers and their friends, in 60% of cases. (Jenkins, n.d.)

We need to add that the lack of presentation of gamers' experience and any positive influences, which can be derived from video games (e.g., development of creativity, imagination, and technological skills, English language skills, enhancement of cooperation practices, etc.) indicates a superficial understanding about the phenomenon and perpetuates non-empirical trends based on illogical and over-generalizing principles.

Experiencing virtual existence within a game can radically vary from user to user; moreover, these experiences rely on different factors such as: ambient factors; amount of time available for playing; the users state (relaxed or tense); main purpose for playing; personal history with different games genres; affinity for science fiction and fantasy literature and/or movies. This list is probably limited, but these were the main factors found by performing the gamer – researcher role.

My motivation in conducting this research derives from the necessity of elaborating a theoretical interdisciplinary framework which approaches from a critical perspective the social, cultural and identity facets of online games and virtual spaces. Furthermore, considering the pronounced digitization of everyday life and the technological mediation of human experiences and identities, I consider it important to interrogate the traditional meanings of inter-individual relations and the practices of conveying identity markers within the context of the techno-cultural paradigm. In accordance with Mark Poster, I consider that the importance of cyber-culture research and its transformations translated into the offline world resides in the project of *rethinking* the human in conjugation with the new technologies: "What began as a Cold War effort to speed up communications has become cyberspace, an electronic geography that re-territorializes pre-existing geographies, opening new social and cultural worlds that only beginning to be explored but that quite probably are already redefining what it means to be human ." (Poster, 2002 : 27)

The purpose of this research is to assess the necessity for the socio-cultural approaches towards the virtual communities' phenomenon, and specifically towards the Romanian gamer's virtual communities. Moreover, the research aims to provide an exploratory and analytical framework of the multiple ways in which the human identity (and hence, its referential markers such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, age and socio-economic status, or

class) is constructed, performed and negotiated within the Romanian virtual spaces of online games.

The research objectives focus on the following aspects:

- 1) Observing and analyzing the structural and cultural characteristics of these virtual spaces in relation to performing and constructing identity markers;
- 2) Observing the gender identities mediated and performed by gamers, through interactions in online games, and conceptualization of the hegemonic gendered identity patterns;
- 3) Exploring the ways of conveying the "invisible" identity markers such as ethnicity, nationality, socio-economic status, and determining their importance in constructing the analyzed virtual communities;
- 4) Identify the defining dimensions of the virtual spaces related to MMORPGs³, as plural identity spaces, which destabilize the virtual / real border.

The thesis is structured in five chapters, which present the theoretical framework of identity construction and performance in virtual spaces, the research results and discussions, and the concluding remarks.

Chapter 1 examines the main concepts and theories related to cyberspace. Throughout this paper, we acknowledge the cyberspace as a techno-cultural construction whose development led to social, economic, cultural and identity transformations. The short description of the history of the Internet and the ways in which information and communication technologies can be used in accordance with users' purposes, highlights the difficulty of conceptualizing a unitary definition of cyberspace. Applied and used as means for maximizing national-security systems, and likewise, as platforms engaged in challenging national and international politics, the new technologies can be considered oppressive means of control, and at the same time, tools of democratization and de-legitimizing oppression.

The theoretical framework approaching the impact of cyberspace on gender, ethnicity, race and class manifestations is also defined by conceptual ambivalence. The three sets of theories analyzed within this chapter presents several different perspectives on how

³ Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game – ``a special type of adventure game that usually incorporates three major elements: 1) a specific quest, 2) a process for evolving a character through experience to improve his/her ability to handle deadlier foes, 3) the careful acquisition and management if inventory items for the quest (i.e., weapons, armor, healing items, food, and tools).`` (Stahl, 2005)

individuals' identity is constructed, or rather, deconstructed through the new technologies. By presenting the theoretical framework of *identity cyborg-ization* and "fluid identities" (Donna Haraway, 1991; Barbara Kennedy, 2000; Claudia Springer, 1999; Tiziana Terranova, 2000), the *liberation* theories specific to the post-humanist perspective (Stelarc, 2000; Mark Dery, 2000; Rosanne Stone, 2000), and identity performance and symbolic interactionism (Lory Kendall, 2002; Tom Boellstorff, 2008; Erving Goffman, 2007; Judith Butler, 2004), this chapter attempts to answer the following questions: What happens when individuals disconnect themselves of the social reality and they chose to perform any other role or identity, different from their daily performance within the social and private spheres? What happens when they return to their pre-established identities and roles, after disconnecting from the Internet? Are individuals able to overcome the electronic frontier through the new technologies, and thus to become empowered in exploring the various arenas of gender, class, race etc.? Does a performing virtual identity represent the transfer to a post-human existence, one defined in strong correlation with the inter-human relations technologization?

Abstracted as a space with a powerful potential of overcoming the constraints to which individuals are subjected to, in the offline life, the cyberspace is theorized as an environment where identity racist and sexist policies are dislocated. The cyborg could be the new citizen of postmodern societies engaged to celebrate the most diverse and mixed forms of experience and identity. Furthermore, the opportunity to explore multiple identities, and perhaps identities which are contradictory to those assumed by the user in his/her offline life, is equated with the process of flexible understanding and acceptance of the *other*. From a radical deconstructionist perspective, post-humanist theories emphasizes that the facilitation of individuals' identity transcendence through the new technologies will be preceded by the enhanced opportunity of transgressing the corporeality limit to a complete fusion human - technology. Identity performance and symbolic interactionism theories provide a critical approach of the normative and axiological neutrality in cyberspace. Inasmuch as identity is constructed and performed through interactions with others, the cyberspace should be analyzed in terms of interactions among users, and not by excluding them. The discursive strategies through which members of virtual communities construct desirable dominant identities and reproduce power relations constitute the principle by which one measures identity *utopias* in virtual worlds. This last set of perspectives on rethinking the human in the digital age represents the theoretical framework of this research.

Identity and corporeality, or the possibility of deconstructing the artificial / human dichotomy, through cyberspaces, represents one of the central theoretical aspects in conceptualizing the impact of the new technologies on overcoming the constraints of identity markers and *eliberating* subjectivities. As a socio-cultural construct, which is subjected to the norms and regulations in the real world, the body prescribes ethnic, racial, gendered and class identities to individuals. Quoting Mary Douglas, Bordo theorizes the body as "a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced (...)." (Bordo, 1992:13) Therefore, the body is a cultural representation of the social and cultural constructions of what it means to be male or female, dominant or dominated - in terms of identity markers - while these constructions are maintained and reproduced, despite bodily invisibility. The technologization of corporeality is not preceded by the eradication of the last one, but by its flexible adaptation to a different space, a virtual one. I consider it necessary to point out that, since the body is a cultural medium of identity production, the body is also the means by which individuals reproduce systems of identity differences. In other words, through communication (computer-mediated communication, in our case), individuals articulate attitudinal values and identity norms, which regulate identity performances to social control, exerted through the virtual-social order (Bourdieu, 1991). As far as the technology becomes a new space where relations among individuals are mediated, cyberspace cannot be theorized apart from the socio-cultural interactions among users, since these constitute its fundamental discursive base.

According to the post-humanist theories, one of the most important opportunities resulted from the displacement of the identity-corporeality relation in cyberspace consists within the various possibilities of performing identity markers different from those of users. Yet, the patterns follow by individuals in order to negotiate and perform their virtual identities through interactions with other users reveal that identity and (non)corporeality "are constructed by descriptive codes, which incorporate [ethnic, racial, class and gendered] expectations". (Stone, 2000: 523)

Since both online and offline identities are contextual and situated instances of identity manifestation, they cannot be dissociated. Furthermore, considering the perspective of social cognition, we observe that identity is performed according to the expectations of others, and consistent with the individual's own values and norms. As Iluț emphasizes, "the individual manifest himself/herself in society (...) according to some already known and internalized models, (...) [and] according to specific situational gauges, which are derived from a complex process of social learning." (Iluț, 2001: 75) Therefore, - excepting the geo-physical

coordinates and the bodies' invisibility - virtual spaces need to be addressed as real, alternatives spaces, where inter-individual relations are socio-cultural produced. Cyberspace neither replaces, nor simulates (offline) reality. Although the images and textual content are the only means of materialization of these virtual worlds, cyberspace imposes the necessity for us to reinterpret it as a specific medium through which identities and reality are technologically articulated.

Chapter 2 outlines the research methodology. Each research question is designed as a correspondence to the research objectives, as it follows:

1) What cultural elements can be identified in MMORPGs? (correspondent to objective 1);

2) What types of values, ideologies, norms and practices define these virtual spaces? (correspondent to objective 1);

3) To what extent does gender represent an expressive marker of gamers identity? (correspondent to objective 2);

4) Which are the gendered virtual culture main features? (correspondent to objective 3);

5) How are the identity markers manifested within the Romanian gamers virtual communities? (correspondent to objective 3);

6) Which are the hegemonic identity practices of these communities and how are they virtually performed? (correspondent to objective 3);

7) How do female and male gamers relate to the construction of online identities? (correspondent to objective 4) ;

8) What are the virtual "limits" of identity? (correspondent to objective 4)

In order to capture the complex phenomenon of Romanian gamers and to answer the research questions mentioned above, I have applied three methods of qualitative research. Since our topic is constructed by three main different features (online identities, offline identities and their common denominator, the virtual space), which are defined through their conjugation with cultural, technological, social, economic and identity factors, I have considered that qualitative research methods are the most appropriate for the study of virtual communities.

The three qualitative research methods (participant observation, document analysis and semi-structured interviews) were adapted to research specificities and they have been exclusively applied through/in cyberspace. The participant observation was conducted within

the MMORPG Cabal Online, and it sought to identify cultural narratives, and alike moral and ethical systems which prescribe power relations and norms of behavior in virtual worlds.

Through applying the participant observation method I intended "to analyze the cultural significance of video games by observing attitudes, hidden beliefs and values" (Berger, 2009: 50). The observation guide was built according to the dimensions theorized by Arthur Asa Berger in "Video Games: A Popular Culture Phenomenon" (2009: 50-51). Thus, participant observation aimed to identify the human representation in virtual spaces, emphasizing the following aspects:

1) The symbolic construction of heroes, heroines and monsters (gender, class, race and power relations between virtual characters / players)

2) The ethical and moral system of reference, constructed through the game narratives, online activities, rules and regulations.

3) Online and offline similarities, through identifying the types of attitudes and behaviors reproduced into the virtual world.

The method of document analysis was applied in three online forums, which gather Romanian gamers, with the purpose of identifying how identity is constructed, performed and negotiated in cyberspace. Markham theorizes that "through the deceptively simple process of exchanging messages, complex and transformative understandings of self identity, (...) and reality are negotiated." (Markham, 2004: 112) Threads represent much more than exchanging messages, and in the context of this paper, their dimension of social documents consists in the rich information they provide to the researcher with regard to online identity performances and the construction of identity markers according to the criteria of socio-virtual desirability. Despite the fact that online threads do not follow the definition of traditional categories of documents (such as letters, laws, newspaper articles, etc.), forums textual productions represent, in my opinion, social documents whose content is similar to public debates, decision making negotiations, or sharing common experiences. Forums and computer-mediated communication used in these virtual spaces act as important catalysts of users with common interests. This research method has been applied to the textual content of the three Romanian gamer forums analyzed: Cabal Romanian sub-forum (Cabal), Professional Gamers League (PGL), and Computer Games (CG).

I have selected the first mentioned communities based on their longevity in the Romanian online environment (PGL exists since 2002, and CG since 1997) and due to the large number of members, these two representing the most popular Romanian gamer virtual communities. Cabal Online Romanian sub-forum is part of the international community of

forums dedicated to the game, and exists since 2008 - the year in which the first thread was posted. The selection of this sub-forum for our analysis is motivated by the necessity to explore in depth the Cabal community, and to observe contextual differences of in-game and out-of game identity manifestations.

A total number of 130 threads has been analyzed, as it follows: 35 – Cabal Romanian sub-forum; 51 – PGL; and 44 – CG, while the total number of comments is 16.217.

Analysis of forum threads (and comments) was carried out through qualitative descriptive content analysis. The threads were selected from “off-topic” or “normal threads” forums categories, because these categories provide rich data regarding members’ interaction, their attitudes and perspectives on identity issues, and their identity markers articulation in cyberspace. The sampling was purposive. Data was collected until information became repetitive, thus reaching a level of saturation.

The semi-structured interviews were applied through Skype to fourteen participants. The interviews were focused on the individual experiences of interviewees, and on how they negotiate the cultural, social and identity structures in online games. The participants have been selected by snowball sampling methodology. I have preferred to use the Skype software in order to conduct the interviews due to practical and methodological considerations. The geographical dispersion of participants has constituted a strong impediment in conducting *face-to-face* interviews. The methodological considerations relate to the necessity of acknowledging the virtual space and new technologies of communication as real spaces and means that can support not only interactions among Internet users, but also the development of social research. Skype’s video - chat function along interviewing supports the understanding of cyberspace as a space where people still “meet face-to-face, though (...) under a redefinition of both ‘meet’ and ‘face’.” (Stone, 2000 : 524)

Chapter 3 aims to identify the particularities of the socio-cultural phenomenon of online games, new technologies and emergence of virtual communities in Romania. Considering that this thesis approaches identity and identity performance from a socio-cultural perspective, the third chapter investigates how the historical, economic and social Romanian conditions have shaped the new techno-cultural existences. The chapter presents the development of ICT and the Internet in Romania. Marked by constraints and suspicion of the communist regime, the researchers’ efforts in the field are challenged, after 1989, by the lack of public authorities’ interest in developing the informatics infrastructure in Romania.

This chapter is an attempt of reconstructing the history of video games in Romania through the collective memories of gamers. The transition from ideological propaganda,

observed within the narratives of board games popular during the communist regime, to the video games which have challenged users creativity and imagination, has influenced the lives of thousands of Romanian players. Video games represent cultural productions, which generate specific socio-cultural situations whose impact is highlighted in various Romanian gamer virtual communities. Divided by genre, time and resources granted to the gaming process, as well as by the principle of "seniority" in the use of video games, Romanian gamers communities converge in constructing a dominant identity of the gamer. This dominant identity encompasses the following features: male gender, ethnic Romanian, heterosexual and socio-professional status above the average.

The online dimension added to first-person shooter (FPS), platform, role- playing (RPG), and strategy / tactic (RTS / RTT) games have replaced the singularity feature defining the act of playing – exclusive until the late 90 – with virtual interaction among gamers. Consequently, the MMO dimension - massively multiplayer online - has radically transformed video games, by facilitating socialization with other gamers, construction of communities of practice following the common playing of these games, and last but not least, by humanizing cyberspace through the simultaneous virtual presence of tens or hundreds of thousands of players at the same time, in same place. MMOs (regardless of the type of game) are online games "where large number of players participate in game play and socialize within a sprawling virtual environment. Players from all over the world to connect simultaneously, forming clans, factions and guilds as well as playing as individuals. (...) The players regard themselves as guild members first and foremost, with an almost tribal sense of belonging." (Winder, 2008: 15-21)

Currently, the Romanian online gamers are divided according to the types of favorite games, among MMORPG, MMORTS and MMOFPS. Professional Gamers League (the platform is dedicated to gamers of MMORTS, FPS or 3rd-Person Shooters, such as Dota, Quake, and Counter Strike) has over 87,000 members. The Role Play community is dedicated to MMORPG gamers and counts approximately 20,000 members. Computer Games Community gathers gamers of various genres and has over 340,000 members. Due to the fact that many gamers may not have a membership account on the mentioned platforms, the numbers presented above are relative, and they cannot provide an accurate image of the Romanian gamer communities.

Technological, social and cultural constructions, cyberspace and its component virtual communities can provide to the users extensive opportunities of challenging oppressive gender norms, or, conversely, of articulating new practices of gendered oppression. The

typology of Romanian gamers virtual communities (divided by genre, demographic characteristics, and by gamers' playing style - hardcore, casual or veteran) has revealed that the "hegemonic masculinity", as defined by Connell (1995), represents a defining criterion of the these communities cultural configuration. R. W. Connell develops the concept of hegemony, firstly theorized by Antonio Gramsci in the context of the class relations and "the cultural dynamics by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life"; thus, "hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women." (Connell , 1995 : 77)

Hegemonic masculinity manifests itself not only through the subordination of women, but also through subordinating and marginalization of other types of masculinity, which are defined by non-hegemonic identity criteria. Therefore, according to Connell, a hegemonic model of masculinity is characterized by the following identity markers and socio-cultural attributes:

- Appurtenance to the Caucasian race (or, in our case, to the ethnic majority - Romanian). Within the typology of gamer's communities, Romani gamers are depicted by the dominant gamers as an inferior standard of Romanian masculinity. The recourse to cultural stereotypes (poor education, and a low level of intelligence which influence the preference for specific gamer genres) and biological stereotypes (expressed through assumptions about Romani predisposition to criminal activities) are discursive strategies employed in order to distinguish among hegemonic and marginal male gamers. The frequent use of the term *cocalar* within the communication practices of these communities provides an in-depth image on how ethnicity and social status intersect in constructing hegemony and subordination of certain masculinities.

- heterosexuality - this hegemonic masculinity feature is not very observable within the typology gamers communities, but is emphasized within the specific analysis conducted in virtual communities, beyond the divisions by favorite genres, seniority or passion for playing. Therefore, hetero-normativity derives as a heterosexual identity regulation, and is articulated through the rejection of homosexual members of Romania gamer's communities;

- Appurtenance to the middle class, or an extended access at cultural and economic means. This dimension of hegemonic masculinity is the most noticeable principle of constructing and dividing communities of gamers. The cultural and economic means at which gamers have access shape the status of the ``true`` gamer, regardless his/her affiliation to a hardcore gamer

community, the preference for MMORPG or MMORTS, or his/her seniority status. Early access to video games was facilitated by individuals' appurtenance to the middle class, while the early gamers' future socio-professional status has followed the same class patterns. It is important to note the "nostalgia" of veteran gamers to be among the first users of the Internet and computer technologies in Romania; moreover, these gamers consider that other gamers, that haven't had enjoyed similar techno-cultural privileges (until those have become social and economic affordable), are unable to properly understand the importance of these resources;

- Repudiation of attitudes and emotional traits understood as feminine. This hegemonic masculinity practice is preponderantly enacted within the interactions with gay, metrosexual and emo gamers. However, we have also acknowledged the CG community dominant attitude and reactions when a female gamer seeks to bring awareness with regard to online gender harassment. Revealing online discriminatory practices is apprehended, by gamers, as a feminine strategy of "seeking attention" in the absence of gaming skills. Consequently, gamers legitimize violence against female gamers by ignoring, marginalizing women's experiences which are different from the dominant ones;

- Capacity for violence and aggression. The language employed by gamers is characterized by a propensity for vulgarity and formulating threats/insults at other gamers. However, regarding the common language registry used by gamers, Computer Games represent the less violent community. In comparison with Professional Gamers League, the first mentioned community is more prone to virtually sanctioning the violation of behavioral norms; this engagement to virtual rules and norms of CG admins (and users, alike) may provide an explanation of the gradually differences in verbal violence expressed within these communities.

Chapter 4 presents the results of research. The results reveal the ethnocentric and masculine discursive strategies through which identity markers are constructed and performed within gamer communities. Additionally, the results portray the analyzed virtual spaces as systems through which cultural and social meanings assigned to inter-individual relations are produced and negotiated.

The chapter is structured in three main sub-chapters which present and discuss the results acquired through the three different perspectives applied in our process of studying the Romanian gamer communities and online games, and they highlight the necessity for an interdisciplinary approach to the complex phenomenon of gaming culture. Since my thesis aimed to research the ways in which identity is constructed, performed and negotiated within the Romanian cyberspaces, I have applied a cultural perspective which facilitates the

observation of the "process of defining, positioning and recognition through which some individuals and groups delineate form others." (Vincze, 2004: 362) The results highlight that identities and virtual spaces are cultural, social and political interdependent constructions.⁴

The first sub-chapter presents the results derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted with Romanian gamers. Interviewed gamers understand their online identities as inter-connected with their offline identities; thus, cyberspaces are considered to support the extension of the human and virtual, likewise, beyond the physical reality sphere. Gender, ethnicity, nationality and socio-professional status experiences vary by participant, and they are influenced by interactions with other gamers (via communication) and online actions developed (cooperation or confrontation with virtual crimes). The high degrees of online games attractiveness are identified by interviewees through the following elements: friendship relations with other gamers, leisure and escapism of daily problems. Identity performances and the negotiation of online positions are subscribed to a wide experiential spectrum, from "the Internet as the ultimate form of democracy" (Victor, Dota2), to an acute perception of exclusion within the online worlds, due to the hegemony of the English language (Mihai, Cabal Online). In conclusion, I consider that the process of studying virtual worlds, in the absence of the human factor represent an incomplete research endeavor.

Furthermore, the interview results highlight the strong link between the online and offline identity. Gamers relates to these identities as a unitary experiential concept, as they tend not to dissociate online and offline identity manifestations. For example, interviewees do not consider that the online performance of a different gender influences their offline gender identity out of the game. Hence, most of the respondents approach the online gender as an aesthetic or functional option within game.

Half of the respondents have engaged in a process of self-identification with their virtual characters. These respondents further explain how virtual characters allow the extension of their offline life attitudinal attributes, passions for exploration and investigation, and projection of an idealized body image. However, the construction of a virtual character does not necessarily imply gamers' self-identification with the latter. Construction of a virtual character may, indeed, provide an opportunity for performing and projecting a desirable

⁴ In accordance with the purpose and objective of this research, I engage with the cultural approach of (online) identities, as theorized by Vincze. This cultural perspective "approaches the cultural (the set of meanings and significations, as well as the practices of producing the cultural), the social (mechanisms of delineating and constructing boundaries amid individuals/groups), and the political (negotiating definitions and positions within a social hierarchy) in their interaction." (Vicze, 2004: 362)

identity; in these particular situations, the cyberspace provides extended opportunities of liberation from offline life constraints. However, the construction of female characters by users may converge with practices of objectifying femininity, through the male gamers control and gaze exerted towards female cyber-bodies. Defined as spaces dominated by males, online games imply gendered techniques of negotiation inter-individual relations, which reinforce gendered assumptions of male superiority over female gaming skills.

If the online gender is regarded by respondents as having a superficial significance during the process of online identity construction, they point out to nationality and ethnicity as the *true* identity markers, as they constituted the main criteria of online discrimination. The Romanian language, nationality and ethnicity designate the main criteria of constructing micro-communities within games. Thus, the nationality and ethnicity become exclusive standards of appurtenance to virtual groups, while the performance of these identity markers conveys in tactics of culturally differentiating one group from another, in order to avoid discriminatory situations. Stereotypes targeting Romanians transcend the real, offline world, and they are transformed into techniques of reinforcing symbolic violence, through which Romanian gamers are marginalized or verbally harassed by foreign gamers. Additionally, the hegemony of the English language, as the common language of virtual worlds, disadvantages gamers with an average knowledge of this international language.

The interviewees believe that one of the most important features of online games consists in enhanced interaction among users. Yet, online friendships are legitimated as *real* only if gamers meet and socialize beyond cyberspace, in the offline world. The body invisibility and the lack of face-to-face interactions are the main factors which influence a low level of confidence in accepting the others are what they claim to be. We can observe herein a paradoxical understanding of identity: although respondents consider their online identities as consistent with their offline ones, other gamers' identity performances are submitted to a careful process of analysis and verification, the offline space thus representing the ultimate meaning of validation and testing others' veraciousness.

The second sub-chapter presents the results drawn from conducting the participant observation method. Although the ludic specific and structure of Cabal Online may influence a biased evaluative opinion upon the artificiality and lack of socio-cultural importance of games, their narratives are embedded with cultural, moral, ethical, economic and dominant identities latent contents. Similar with the techno-cultural artifacts represented by the online forums, MMORPGs construct and prescribe hierarchical identity regulations, which are justified by legitimizing gamers' "normalcy" or "correctness" over in-game monsters.

Moreover, financial capabilities and membership in a superior virtual structure that acts as a principle of organizing the virtual world (controlled from the offline world by game developer), represent other factors of shaping hierarchies of online identities. For example, an advanced level player whose actions supported the game's economic system will always be ascribed with a higher status, in comparison with a simple player who lacks financial resources.

The virtual world of Cabal is strictly organized according to the moral principles of *good* and *evil*, and their derivate dichotomies: *normal* and *abnormal*, *strong* and *weak*, *compliance* and *exclusion*. The moral and ethical principles, power relations between players and game' authorities, as well as the symbolic constructions of gender, race, class, and human nature that structure this MMORPG emphasize the impact of the socio-cultural world in constructing a virtual world.

The virtual status of being one of the best players is associated with the pride of achieving higher levels and items that are not available to everyone. Somehow, it was surprising to me to notice that there are very few players who understand their online activities as a real form of relaxation. A high level account (acquired by a player without using illegal programs or investing real money in game) is equated by the players with the respectable results of a work successfully accomplished. Although the use of hacking programs and the hidden practices of purchasing an account already created and leveled up represent prohibited actions and they are considered to affect other players' equal access to the virtual resources and consequently, the fairness of the game play process, these are not the main reasons due to which some players avoid using them. The pride correlated with the high status achieved through their honorable efforts, is indicated by players as having the greatest influence into the rejection of "cheating the system".

Consistent with the techno-cultural construction of MMORPGs, Cabal Online promotes the manifestation of pro-social behaviors among players. Iluț theorizes these types of pro-social behaviors by identifying the following behavioral norms: social responsibility, reciprocity and social justice. (Iluț, 2004: 83-84) The social responsibility norm is reflected in game when advanced level players offer their help to players with a lower level, in need to level up or to accomplish a dangerous quest. However, we need to emphasize that completely altruistic actions are almost non-existent within the virtual worlds. The benefits of helping other players in leveling up consist in gaining experience points (which are usually shared between the two players), and in addition to this, in reinforcing the virtual status of game connoisseur of the advanced level player. Furthermore, this practice is necessary in

maintaining a functional guild, in order to avoid guild members to leave the group, as a consequence of not receiving help or being integrated into the guild.

The reciprocity norm is based upon the development of relations of friendship and cooperation practices. The mutual aid is stimulated by mutual needs: players help each other permanently, because virtual quests and missions require cooperation among players. We need to add that some players that were confronted with undesirable situations, such as not receiving back large amounts of alz loaned to other players, or not being helped in difficult quests and dungeons by players they have previously helped. Violation of the reciprocity norm results in the termination of friendship and cooperation relations, and depending by how much the "injured" player considers to be emotionally affected, he/she may engage in public campaigns of denigrating the 'unreliable' players.

The social justice norm is reflected by players' rejection of informal economic activities, and also by respecting the practice of equally sharing virtual items resulted from collective virtual actions. During the time of conducting my participant observation, I have not encountered any case of pure virtual altruism. Therefore, we conclude that online altruism and pro-social behaviors can be explained by reduction at a cost-benefit relation, as it follows: "when individuals perceive, during their interaction with others, that their individualistic and egoistic behaviors determine a decrease of utility for themselves, they are inclined to review these behavioral effects toward others, and they and become willing to replace them with altruistic ones." (Iluț, 2004: 86)

The last sub-chapter presents the results of the document analysis conducted into the three gamer forums. Along this sub-chapter, the results are structured according to the main dimensions of identity markers constructed and performed in cyberspaces: ethnicity and nationality; hegemonic masculinities vs. subaltern masculinities (this division is observable through the performance of identity markers such as socio-professional status, age, and sexual orientation), and gender relations. Through our research results, the theories focused on emphasizing the redundancy of identity markers in virtual worlds are critically deconstructed. For example, our results reveal that the online reality and offline reality are strongly interconnected; thus, a democratic and tolerant reformation of the virtual space is dependent on the reproduction of dominant identities and performance of socio-cultural hegemonic practices, and also on the maintenance of the power hierarchies through referential constructions of categories such as *us* vs. *them*. Within a space where interactions among individuals are exclusively defined by computer mediated communication, the cultural-discursive strategies

and mechanisms represent the patterns of identity construction and performance, in accordance with the virtual community' norms.

``And yet, computers just as easily create boundaries and hierarchies. (...) Indeed, it is difficult to understand just how hierarchy and community can coexist via CMC, in part of the seemingly anarchic (or at least unstructured) nature of many computer networks. A common denominator linking hierarchy and community is identity, not only in terms of one's sense of self but also in terms of one's sense of others``, theorizes Jones. (2002: 27-28) The revolutionary impact of cyberspace on deconstructing oppressive power relations must be observed in strong correlation with the identity narratives which are discursively mediated. Communication (regardless the means of communication, as media or face-to-face, among individuals) is a means of propagating values, perceptions, and desirable or dominant behavioral norms. The institutionalization of symbolic violence within the Romanian gamer communities indicates that these alternative virtual spaces are far from representing non-identity utopias.

The sub-chapter results reveal that identity markers such as ethnicity, nationality, socio-professional status, gender and sexual orientation do not lose their socio-cultural relevance when they are invisible to (other) individuals. Technologically mediated through computer-mediated communication, identities considered as dominant in the offline life reclaim the same status within the virtual space. Since the hegemonic masculinity is the organizing principle of values, norms and socio-political-cultural practices, its main characteristics are also transgressed in cyberspace and they constitute the criteria of individuals' acceptance into the group.

Ethnicity structures inter-ethnic relations between Romanian, Hungarian, and Romani gamers. Romanian gamers state their legitimacy in preserving a pure virtual Romanian space by engaging in conversations based on perpetuation of ethnic stereotypes and manifestation of ``cleansing`` extremist tendencies toward the virtual and offline space, likewise. Describing themselves as victims of discrimination based on nationality, due to the negative image of Romania abroad, Romanian gamers contest the status of Romani gamers in virtual social spaces. Furthermore, the spatialization of chauvinism in cyberspace is noticeable through Romanian gamer's discursive strategies of interrogating Hungarian gamers and non-gamers loyalty to the national community.

Masculinity, defined by heterosexuality, adulthood and average socio-professional status, represents another criterion of membership to the gamer communities. Cyber-bullying and (in some extreme cases) exclusion from the community are acknowledged as practices of

normalization applied to members considered to be *deviant* in terms of sexual orientation or an effeminate lifestyle. Members of the community that are considered by others as representatives for a subaltern type of masculinity do not contest the hegemonic normative order imposed by hegemonic male gamers. As noted through the analysis, subaltern masculinities are comprehended and justified in relation to the hegemonic masculinity, since gamers with a subaltern masculinity identity tend to perpetuate and reinforce the hierarchical order of masculine values.

Femininity, the dichotomous cultural correspondent of masculinity, is interpreted by forum users as biological and cultural constraint to the development of a legitimate gamer identity. In order to avoid contradictory discussions with male users, female users chose to maintain a low level of online interaction; this conflict management strategy leads to gendered segregation within the virtual space of PGL community. Notwithstanding, while the performance of an ethnic minority or subaltern masculinity identity follow the masculine norm impositions, the discursive articulation of feminine identity is focused on challenging the exclusive hegemonic masculinity and on reclaiming an equal status within gamer communities. We conclude that, despite the ability of cyberspace ``to “complexly rewire” preexisting racial, sexual, and gendered inequities. (...) however, these recycled discourses reinscribe conventional binary logics (which privilege the masculine over the feminine, the natural over the artificial, the real over the simulated, and the human over the machine (...).” (Matrix, 2006: 14)

The last chapter presents the final conclusions. Through this thesis, I have attempted to redefine the virtual by analyzing how human identity is constructed and performed amid the cultural intersection between real and virtual spaces. Despite its impalpable and artificial main characteristics, cyberspace is “humanized” through the cultural, attitudinal and social digital finger-prints of the individuals who develop online identities. Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston (1995: 3) theorize that "the post-human body is a technology, a screen, a projected image". Nonetheless, online identities represent much more than images projected in an alternative space. The importance that Internet users associate to identity markers, such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, and socio-professional status suggest the human is rather constructed, than deconstructed through the new technologies.

The first objective of this research aimed to observe and analyze the cultural and structural particularities of cyberspaces, in relation to users’ performance and construction of identity markers. The cultural narratives of online games, such as MMORPGs, outline the virtual space through a set of values, norms, and practices which are related to the essentialist

and deterministic ideologies. Therefore, the symbolic structures identified in Cabal Online assign individuals with an essential good human nature; yet, this good human nature needs to be well-harnessed through a permanent effort in preserving societal values and enhancing the social progress. The respect for societal values is equated with the accomplishment of predetermined social roles, and compliance with behavioral imposed norms. Any attempt of challenging the socially worthy roles (and not conforming to the system of norms and rules) determines virtual sanctions, and eventually the exclusion from community of those members who oppose the virtual social order. Considering the antithetical construction of virtual characters controlled by players and monsters, we observe that the virtual world constructed in games outlines a clear order of power relations and conflicting interests, wherein the appurtenance to a higher class or race justifies the use of violence against inferior races. Guilds are formed in accordance with the common identity markers of the players. The nationality and ethnicity represent the most important criteria of cultural delineation among the groups of players, in-game.

The second research objective aimed to observe how gender identities are mediated and performed through gamers' interactions, and to identify hegemonic or dominant gendered identity patterns. The main criteria applied in order to conceptualize cyberspace as a platform through which gender relations can be reformed were the invisibility of users' bodies and the vast opportunities in exploring different gendered identities. Female virtual characters cyberbodies are hyper-sexualized (through revealing clothing); hence, the virtual world of the game emphasizes the perpetuation of sexist views through objectifying female bodies. Furthermore, the results suggest that gender relations are rather polarized, than fluidized within virtual spaces, since players' justifications for performing trans-gendered identities relate to the need of "gazing at something beautiful" and of expressing strict heterosexual identities.

The demographic structure of gamer online communities reveals an over-representation of male users, while online games are defined by practices considered to be masculine, such as: competitiveness, propensity to commit acts of violence, high levels of verbal aggressiveness. Consequently, gamers are expected to successfully accomplish their gendered masculine pre-determined roles. Due to the fact that female' gendered attributes are inconsistent with the masculine norm; female users are under-evaluated as players with appropriate skills and abilities.

The third research objective was reached through the results of discursive structures analysis conducted within the three Romanian gamer virtual communities. As we have

observed, the online communities have a strong Romanian ethnic core, due to which members of ethnic minorities are not considered to be *true* Romanians.

The applicability of R.W. Connell's hegemonic masculinity model in gamer online communities has revealed the masculine order as referential within these communities. *Deviant* homosexual masculinities are pathologized and dehumanized by heterosexual users, following a pattern of antithetical construction of masculinities. Homophobia represents not only a principle of structuring power relations among male users, but also a means of reinforcing a hetero-normativity virtual order. Poor education and below average socio-professional status, puberty, emo and metrosexual lifestyles represent other impediments in gaining acceptance within the Romanian virtual communities. Consequently, users are too constrained in performing desirable identities set by community.

The last research objective aimed to identify the dimensions of the virtual spaces related to MMORPGs, as plural identity spaces, which destabilize the virtual / real border. The discursive practices of construction, negotiation and identity performance suggest that we need to conceptualize cyberspace as an articulation of reality through the use of the new technologies of communication and information. Considering that millions of individuals use their spare time by developing online identities and they participate in the process of redefining inter-individual relations through their technologization, we can conclude that online identities represent the extension of offline identities into flexible and accessible mediums.

Perhaps one of the most important conclusions that resulted from researching the virtual worlds suggests that the identity is permanently constructed and reconstructed through techno-cultural interactions and narratives. In conclusion, we emphasize that identity "(...) is not a property of bodies or something originally existent in human beings,...it is the product and process of various social technologies, institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices, as well as practices of daily life." (De Lauretis, 1987:2)

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