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Self Presentation and Blended Identity in the Everyday Virtual Life:

A Case Study of *Fallout 76*

A honors thesis presented by

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To

The Linfield University Department of Sociology and Anthropology

In partial fulfillment of

Bachelor of Arts

In Anthropology

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Introduction

Self-presentation in a virtual online context has taken on an increasingly significant and complex role due to the exponential growth of online presence, personas, avatars, and subsequent role-playing behavior, expanding the various ways in which we present ourselves in virtual spaces. The emergence of this “virtual self” comes with the growing options for online interaction, including social media, blogs, forums, and a wide variety of interactive video games. Reliable and enduring elements of the virtual setting have helped to foster and create a sense of relatable community. Through repeated and ritualized virtual interaction, users generate novel community norms that arise from their routine encounters.

In this thesis, I examine the role of self-presentation in online multiplayer gameplay settings to understand how social actors present themselves and negotiate online and offline identities in virtual spaces. In particular, I examine the presentation of self, and the “blended self”, in the dystopic open-world role-playing game, *Fallout 76*. Through this ethnographic research, I demonstrate that in this particular virtual world the communal norms are altruistic. However, unlike works like Solnit (2009), these behavioral norms do not emerge as a direct result of the natural disaster, despite many similarities. They are a by-product of the player's attempt to recreate himself in this online frame and a functioning community within the already established game that ultimately reciprocates this altruism. Through this research I aim to examine what sustains this behavior and what leads to altered player behavior that does not match the troll-esque stereotypes that many associate with big name games.

Literature Review

In 2010, the money spent within the gaming market generated roughly \$25.1 billion (Vilches, 2011). This pales in comparison as now in 2023 the global games and services market is expected to hit roughly \$195 billion (Browne, 2022). One area that has been growing on the global scale in the last several decades is video game culture. Video games have provided a new way for individuals to interact with both complete strangers and close acquaintances in a seemingly infinite virtual space. They offer new opportunities for self-presentation and a much broader audience beyond their daily face-to-face environment for whom individuals may perform. In virtual game environments, players escape their immediate reality and experiment with different personas, or recreate their offline identities within a whole new world. With this new platform for social interaction comes the potential for new depictions of self.

Conventional sociological and anthropological understandings of self apply similarly as we leave the physical and enter the virtual. The self was originally conceptualized by Herbert Mead (1934). In Mead's eyes, the perceived self was a product of collective sociological experiences that rendered how one acted. The self is emergent as a result of being a social creature and interacting within a society. Goffman (1959) furthered the efforts to understand the self with his concepts put forth in the *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He coined the term dramaturgy and believed that the theater could be used as a metaphor to understand how individuals generated a sense of identity and how their self could ultimately be performed within the framework of a front stage. He believed that it is through this process that the self emerges to perform for the respective audience. His theories on framing base the individuals'

attempt to present oneself within the framework of a specific setting, which ultimately dictates how the front stage will be situated. The ways in which the frame situates the front stage will ultimately force the acting individual to act a certain way to get the desired response from the respective audience. In other words, the actor will try to *save face* as they perform in hope of getting their approval. Weigert and Gecas (2003) argue that “the reflected appraisals proposition suggests that we come to see ourselves as we think others see us.” Prior to the multifaceted front stage that technology has introduced, the front stage was much more situational. The complexities of our day-to-day are now stacked with layers of ‘front stages,’ rather than being simply one ‘front stage’ within a given time frame. We may form a sense of identity through a social media platform, such as Facebook or Instagram, but create an entirely different mode of self through an online video game. In a very broad sense, technology has grown so many different forms and frames that provide us with different ways to highlight our identity and perform our understanding of our self.

In the past several years, a number of studies have examined the presentation of self in online environments. For example, Nardi (2010) examined the reward system built into *World of Warcraft* discussing players' reflections on their own avatars, or in-game characters, and examined the addictive properties of games.¹ In contrast, Boellstorff (2008) explored the presentation of self in *Second Life* in his groundbreaking ethnography. *Second Life* is much more moderate than *World of Warcraft* in that it is more closely related to a form of social media that functions as a game. Rather than playing quests and missions, the player is solely focused on interacting with others

¹ *World of Warcraft* is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that situates the player in a hyper-fantasy realm that forces the players to enact role-playing.

online. He notes that players ultimately “concentrate on being [themselves], since that’s what most people are good at” as contrasted with utilizing these online spaces for the purpose of role-playing. Boellstorff also noted various tendencies among character design, highlighting concentration on depicting the self through the use of an avatar, as well as players actions with one another. “The virtual is shaped in powerful ways by referential and practical relationships to the actual world, but these relationships help constitute the virtual itself.” (Boellstorff, 2008, pg 122). He began to see ways in which players’ offline identities were entering the game and dictating how the player would act in this space. Through these observations, Boellstorff begins to allude to what will further be conceptualized as *blended identity*.

This concept of *blended identity* comes from Baker’s (2009) approach to understanding users within an online blog setting. Blended identity is a phenomenon specific to the self’s interaction with the performative stages the online world provides. It is much like platform performance, however the acting individual is genuinely affected by this blending.² There are three stages to blended identity. In the initial stage, the self is brought into an online setting with an initial depiction of himself, whether it be through an icon, username, or avatar. The medial stage involves interacting with the online community. The ways in which the individual interacts with objects and other online users in accordance to how that online community functions, or what the communal norms dictate. The final stage focuses on how this actor now acts differently both online as well as in their offline setting. She conceptualized this while looking at music blogs and breaking apart both the methods of speech, the bloggers avatars, as well as the

² Platform performance is simply the ways in which we act within a certain context. For example: A professor acts differently in front of a class as they would in front of their family. The performance changes depending on the platform.

final reconfiguration of the individual norms and the virtual community's norms. Watson (1997) conducted a similar study of internet communities cultivated in the Phish.net music fan community. Watson outlines the ways in which Phish fans attempt to alter the way more unruly fans behave in the venue setting through their establishment of communal norms on the website. This is taken further into an offline setting as these advocating fans produce pamphlets for these norms to hand-out outside of venues. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) continue the concept of *blended identity* by examining a video game setting and looking at *Second Life* users and the blogs that coexisted alongside their *Second Life* accounts. Bullingham and Vasconcelos concluded that players prefer to re-create their offline persona rather than attempt role-playing a character or *persona adoption*. In many of these games, gameplay options allow players to take on a range of roles available for persona adoption. However, players resort to presenting their offline selves rather than perpetually maintaining a "phony" facade (Goffman 1959). Echoing Bullingham and Vasconcelos, this act of roleplay takes up player attention and physical energy. Here, players are generating novel identities in the virtual realm as an extended "blended" version of themselves.

Zixue Tai and Fengbin Hu (2018) investigated how the video game realm is now generating an underground blackmarket for players to sell in-game items for real life currency, which has become an extremely lucrative business. However, the players have made an image for themselves within their own real-life communities that leads them to make life altering decisions in an effort to maintain this career. What they found was that there are plenty of ways to make real-life money while playing video games by

grinding out hard to achieve items to sell to other players online. However, the decision to pursue this career is a controversial decision as it is not viewed as a highly respected job. This examination showcases another outcome of this blended identity. Through the prescribed value on certain goods within a game, players can earn, or “grind out,” these rewards and sell them for a legitimate profit, despite the disapproval of those in the offline setting.

Rowlands (2018) seeks to find a way to infuse messages of social awareness within already established games by methods of breaking the user's immersion in the online space. They wanted to see how to go about generating messages of social awareness in games that are known for generating an unruly community. (Rowlands et al., 2018). In this study, the focus is on the notoriously violent game *Grand Theft Auto V*. They focus on breaking the overall player immersion within the game to generate different social lessons of awareness to be taught to players more accustomed to that sort of ruthless gameplay. What they did not take into account was the process of blended identity that ultimately shapes how a strong online gaming community interacts with the game itself. By attempting to break player immersion, they sever the process of blended identity and further separate the player from their avatar, as well as the world they are interacting within. As I will discuss later on, blended identity is a theory to better understand the world players are interacting with and building. The ways in which gamers play these “open-world games” are built off of that intense immersion as if it were a more extreme way in which we go to the movies or read a book. It is a way of leaving this physical plane and moving into a novel virtual world.

There turns out to be a great deal of altruistic behavior that accompanies Fallout 76 communal interactions. As Callero (1986) notes, altruism is prosocial behavior. Further, he states that “prosocial action becomes more than following the moral laws of society or the expectations of immediate others; it is behavior from actors who are fully social and thus fully human.” (Callero, 1986, pg 19.) The Fallout franchise takes place in a world in which the Cold War went south. Players are left to wander the nuclear apocalypse and in the setting of Fallout 76, they are left to resettle the wasteland. Similar to Solnit’s (2009) research on understanding communities post disasters, players turn altruistic through this process of blended identity even while simulating disaster survival. Despite there being no mortal threat to the player, and no real nuclear apocalypse, there are still remarkable similarities between both real disaster survivors and those surviving a virtual and fictional disaster. As will be discussed below, the focus is entirely on survival and understanding that helping others and being altruistic is ultimately helpful to yourself. My contribution to this field of work is to examine blended identity in an immersive, online role playing game. I apply an understanding of disaster survivors, theories of self and provide another understanding of how video games ultimately alter the player but also how the players alter the game and its respective community.

Self Performance and Blended Identity

Goffman’s (1959) theories for examining the self provides insights into the ways in which individuals put on an on-going performance in day-to-day interactions. Goffman examines face-to-face interactions between individuals, leading him to the idea of a

'backstage self' and a 'front stage self.' In short, the backstage is isolated preparation for the performance. It provides the individual with time to rehearse for the front stage. The front stage is any social interaction. The self is performing for the respective audience. This formed a separation between how individuals would consciously act within a given context and how they would deliberately strive to influence the impressions that others have of them. The key distinction is that the audience only sees the front stage. Goffman also referred to 'appearance' and 'manner' when discussing the concept of 'front stage' self. This 'appearance' signifies the social status that is being performed. The 'manner' that the actor takes this front stage informs the audience of the stimuli, or moral laws, in which the actor will be performing and adhering to (pg. 24). For example, a comedian's first joke is the manner in which the rest of their act will follow.

Baker (2009) integrates Goffman's framework of self presentation with Kirschner's (2006) notion of *blended learning*. *Blended learning* is a concept that appeared in the early 2000s to bring a combined form of physical classroom education to online education into academic conversation. Baker applied her idea of *blended identity* to understand identity formation in online forums. She used the setting of an online Rolling Stones fan forum to understand how the online setting functioned similarly to offline settings. Baker found that this online form of interaction created *blended identities* whereby the offline self affects the creation of the online self. The online self ultimately ends up altering the offline self simultaneously. The way in which the individual is ultimately affected hinges on the platform with which the user is interacting. In Baker's case, Rolling Stones fans slowly altered their means of

showcasing their fandom after being involved with other fans online. But in the case of Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013), positive interactions in the setting of Second Life gave users confidence to become more social outside of the game's virtual setting.

Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) applied this notion of *blended identity* to the online gaming community and found that oftentimes players recreate themselves online in varying forms, whether it be via username or customizable avatars. They would bring their offline self into this new space. As they participated in this space, the online communal norms would alter not only the way in which they acted online, but offline as well. This idea of *blended identity* refers to instances in which the "offline self informs the creation of a new, online self, which then re-informs the offline self in further interaction with those the individual first met online" (pg. 102). Jepsen Juul (2005), similarly offers the notion of games being "half-real," noting that we bring offline moral laws into how we interact with games. Schulzke (2009) paraphrased Juul's ideas, while discussing moral decisions and presentation in *Fallout 3*, by stating that these games "create fictional worlds for us to play in, but they have an impact on us in this world; our actions in the game determine what our relationship is to the game in reality." The actions we carry out within these worlds are "attributed to self who is [responding] to others" (Weigert and Gecas, 2003, pg 268). But through these actions we gain a reaction from that other. That response further dictates how the acting individual will go on to carry themselves within this online realm.

.In the following sections, I explore different presentational outcomes of player base local within the virtual realm, *Fallout 76*. Through this exploration, I examine the ways in which players experience the process of blended identity and as a result

altruistic norms are established within this community, similarly showcased in offline disaster situations.

Setting and Methods

For this study, I conduct ethnographic research by engaging in participant observation within the virtual realm of *Fallout 76*. Nardi (2010) says that “virtual worlds feel more authentically like cultures than chat rooms because of the elaboration of space and objects” (pg. 18), and therefore should be studied using familiar ethnographic methods. This ‘open-world’ role-playing game (RPG) is set in futuristic post-nuclear-apocalypse West Virginia, otherwise known simply as “Appalachia” within the gameplay narrative.

In this virtual world, autonomous players are left to their own devices to entertain themselves, and their team members, all while seeking out and completing a variety of predetermined missions. The *Fallout* franchise games are designed around an illusion of free will for players going through a wide range of activities and quests. They ultimately make moral decisions that will affect the way in which non-playable characters (NPCs) interact with the player and the way the physical virtual environment changes over time, both of which impact the subsequent outcome of the plotline itself. In contrast to the previous franchise games, *Fallout 76* is the first instance in which the developing company, Bethesda, has presented this style of game through an online multiplayer platform. This multiplayer platform has created a thriving subculture generating social connections and meanings for its users. This is an environment where

players must decide whether to act in selfish and combative ways to engage fellow players in prosocial and altruistic ways.

Data collection involved participant observation as well as oral interviews, both structured and unstructured. I spent over one hundred hours in the game collecting data and conducted ten formal interviews and countless informal interviews. Formal interviews generally lasted anywhere between twenty minutes up to over an hour. Players that I encountered for a formal interview were first asked their age to ensure my respondents were eighteen years or older. After consenting to participate, they were then asked if they consented to being recorded. I also ensure anonymity for my informants by designating the respondents with unique pseudonyms. During the structured interviews, I asked participants a wide range of questions related to their gameplay, community formation, and ethical decision making. My observations consisted of gathering qualitative observational data documenting actions and behaviors that users performed in game play, including how they interacted with other players as well as non-playable characters (NPCs). Through this, I observed and listened to how players communicated, including common ways to describe gameplay and the tone players used to initiate and sustain conversations.

To create a place to carry out my structured interviews, I utilized both public and private spaces within the game to conduct interviews. (See *figure 1* and *figure 3*) In some instances, the structured interviews were held in the wild of the virtual world, and players consented to participate. To create a more private environment and avoid gameplay disruptions, I created a virtual interview booth that was situated on the map so as to gain the attention of new players, or 'noobs,' as they began their gameplay

journey. In the front of my booth, I created a large sign, made of bright purple letters, that read “STOP ‘N CHAT - GET A PRIZE.” (See *figure 1*). The prize itself simply consisted of in-game survival needs - water, health potions, and cooked food, a non-monetary incentive to attract potential players. In between interactions, I would sit at the booth and wait for players to come to me. (See *figure 2*).

My experience as a participant observer mostly consisted of following my two primary informants around as they fulfilled their daily challenges. During these challenges, I attempted to talk with other players we encountered during the quest. Through this method, I gained access to the online community and naturalized interactions more effectively than my booth could have alone. In the event that a player responded, I would invite them back to the interview booth for a more private conversation. In other cases, my informant engaged other players while I hung around to document the way in which they conversed to better understand how players talk to fellow users within the game.³

Lastly, I would take note of how players were dressing their avatars both during interviews and during gameplay. Much of the time, as will be discussed later, players changed their clothing, much like everyday life, to fit the setting that they were engaged in.⁴ I documented and identified patterns in the ways speech was generated and sustained by players, as well as their clothing choice and the ways it was acquired.

³ One important voice chat element to note that separates this game from other game mechanics is that the voice chat is peripheral. The ways in which the players' voices are heard are similar to how we would hear them in the physical realm. This created a very unique way of generating real-time conversations that felt that much more immersive.

⁴ This method was also deployed to attempt to keep track of players that were spending real-life currency to acquire items, those who are actively affiliating with certain NPC factions through attire, and other potential clauses behind their clothing choice.

In the following sections, I demonstrate that players exhibit signs of altruism, even in situations where they are combating other players. While they play, the gamers are incredibly immersed in the setting. I see these immersive aspects crucial to the player's focus within the game. Even when playing the game by themselves, with little interactions with other players, players positively reflect on certain brutal instances they experience within the game. Through these experiences, gamers undergo the process of blended identity and succumb to the altruistic norms established by the online community.

Analysis

Following several months in the virtual Appalachia, there were several initial observations that drew focus towards Goffman's (1959) performative take on *self*, as well as Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) concept of *blended identity*. First and foremost was the physical manifestation of the player and how they readily presented themselves through the use of a customizable avatar. This is something that all players are required to do at the beginning of the game and can be a rather lengthy process. However, I quickly noticed a recurring trend in players making an effort to recreate some significant aspect of their offline self within the game. Next were the ways in which players respond to speech. This seemed to differ according to the tone players would use to frame their interactions. For example, the more a player would act casual, as if they already knew the player, the reciprocating player would respond more readily. But it would also vary according to what the player would ask; and under certain circumstances the level of immersive, or role playing-esque, response would vary.

Some players would quickly respond in a kind-hearted manner. Others would signal that they had no microphone but would still use gestures in-game to answer simple questions. Some players would answer quickly and return to their own adventure. Lastly, the interactions players would have with others at random facilitated the community norms and values generated within the game itself, with the developers having made no visible effort to establish such palpable norms. Despite the gritty and sometimes violent tone of the game, players showcase a level of altruism towards others as it had been shown to them before during their early levels of gameplay as a process of enculturation. In looking at these factors through the lens of *blended identity*, players not only bring an offline manifestation of themselves into the game, but their behavior is also ultimately affected by the experiences that they share with other online players.

Avatars, Character Customization & Presentation

The main essence of self presentation in Fallout 76 came quickly as the questions pertaining to players' character customization highlighted how they entered the game and how players depicted themselves through visual avatars. Similar to what Bullingham and Vasconcelos concluded, "participants often attempt to re-create their offline selves online, rather than actively engaging with persona adoption [or role-playing]" (pg. 109). One interviewee, Hawthorne, made note that despite the game's parameters preventing a full virtual recreation of one's self he "tends to make the characters look somewhat like himself," even in the clothes he chose to wear. For the interview, Hawthorne felt as though he needed to change into something fancier for

the occasion, switching from suspenders and slacks to a full three-piece suit.

Hawthorne explained,

I've always loved wearing, you know, suits and ties in really any game. It's just always a very classy thing to wear. But usually I'll just wear like regular, you know, suspenders there, like suspenders and slacks, just so casual, like farming outfit and like an Amish hat, at least in this game, because it just kind of, you know, fits the environment.

Hawthorne's quote illustrates how player performance is limited by the parameters put in place by the mechanics of avatar construction embedded into the game design. He acknowledges that he wants to put his offline self into this virtual setting. However, the ways in which he commonly dresses and designs his character always tend to be reflective of his offline appearance. The primary difference between real life and other virtual realms is the atmosphere in which players are performing themselves to others. In performing within this particular virtual setting, Hawthorne also applied a dose of role-playing with a clothing choice that not only felt like something he would wear but also something that fit the Appalachian setting. Similarly, my primary informant Gramophone, articulated that the ways in which he dresses his character are constrained or enabled by what the game itself allows. Much like how Hawthorne resorted to the use of suspenders and slacks to both feel like himself, as well as perform a minor role-play, Gramophone used clothing items in a similar sense .

The emergent culture of Fallout 76 creates a norm of carnivalesque self-presentation that resonates with many of the players. In Gramophone's case, he was always dressed in "a caricature of what he is trying to project" or rather a "personification of the way in which [he feels] he is playing the game." Playing with the costume options offered by the game, he was commonly dressed in either a pirate's outfit with a plague doctor mask, or a chef's apron and hat that was covered in gore. He

mentioned that if he could dress like a pirate in real-life, he probably would. This was indicative of his performative freedom encouraged by game-created options for avatar modification. Although he may appear to be adopting a novel visual persona, he was actually wearing what he wished was the norm in the offline realm. However, hegemonic views outside of the game would make this appearance unnatural and out of place. But the framework of the game allows him to dress the way he feels appropriate to who he is; a more authentic version of himself. Despite his rather carnivalesque mask, he added that always tries to wear functional shoes in Appalachia, because he is always walking around so it only makes sense.

Goffman (1959, pg. 19) reminds us “this mask represents the conception we have formed of ourselves-the role we are striving to live up to-this mask is our truer self, the self we would like to be”. This is an explicit example of how these players come into the world with this preconceived notion of one's own self presentation, as depicted by Gramophone above. In playing through the game itself, it allowed for certain attire adoptions, not to be confused with *persona adoptions*, that made a positive space for wearing what one felt appropriate to their authentic self outside of the virtual space and through this generated a sense of *blended identity*. The difference between the two styles of adoptions is that attire adoption can simply be worn, whereas persona adoption consists of outward role playing. For example, had Gramophone acted like a pirate, that would have been persona adoption. However, the simple act of dressing this way is simply attire adoption. This is an explicit step in blended identity. It shows the player prescribing new meaning behind an item that naturally exists in the game on its own.

Gramophone's attire choices followed his personality within the game. When I would follow him to world events in the game, he would always shout into the public chat "HOW ARE THE BOYS DOING ON THIS FINE DAY!" Most often, players, with their microphones and chat turned on, would quickly reciprocate his energy. Gramophone carried this costumed carnivalesque persona into his interactions with other players. This "performance", as he labeled it, provided a way to engage and connect with this virtual community. "They seem to respond better when I pretend like I already know them," Gramophone clarified. The ways in which other players would warmly greet him signifies that the methods of communication used by players are pertinent in attempting to understand what kind of performance is being *given off* as well as the various values instilled in this virtual community. In this instance, Gramophone "presents himself before others, (and) his performance will tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society" (Goffman, 1959, pg. 35), namely a welcoming community. In Goffman's (1959) terms, he was "tactfully attempting to put [them] at ease by stimulating the kind of world [or performance] the superior is thought to take for granted" (pg. 19). This suggests that the other players generate a sense of superiority simply in the ambiguity behind the *mask* that is their *Fallout* avatar. However, they were quickly put at ease as Gramophone "disabled their defenses." In the virtual world of *Fallout 76*, this defense is enacted simply by not responding to the stimulating performer. Once this communication was made, the interacting players would either simply exchange pleasantries or actually exchange goods with no intentions other than perpetuating the altruistic norms established in this online space.

Finding Altruism and Community in the Strangest of Places

Altruism is simply selfless acts for the better of the community or society rather than specifically for the self. Solnit (2009) recounts many instances in which natural disasters actually bring out this altruistic side of people. For example, after the 1906 earthquake in San Francisco, people did not simply resort to bruteful dog-eat-dog mentalities. Rather those that suffered the most seemed to become that much more altruistic. Similar observations were made for survivors of 9/11, Hurricane Katrina and so on. Oddly enough, players within this virtual wasteland setting of Fallout 76 are not much different.

One interviewee, Wolf, stated that they had a hard time getting started in the game and that “a guy noticed [he] wasn’t doing so well as a low level (player) and started giving [him] stuff and helping [him] out. [They] played the game together for several months and got to know each other and his friends - it was true altruism.” Wolf would go on to say that this experience with a fellow player would change the way in which he interacted with the virtual community as well as how he played the game as a whole. By this he means that that altruistic relationship made him want to treat lower levels in a similar sense. As Wolf got to know this new friend through the game, he came to understand that his friend was simply “channeling his inner-self into the game” which was exemplified by this selfless behavior. His friend was trying to be the do-gooder that he felt he was as his offline self. This experience altered the way in which Wolf had originally come into the virtual realm to play the game. He had intended to come into the game like he had in the previous solo-player installments within the franchise. He expected to enact a certain level of chaos into this dystopian wasteland.

However, he found himself trying to spread the good the same way his new friends had for him, in the virtual world as well as the real. This experience was echoed through many interview participants, as they described a recurring, reciprocal relationship of *blended identity* that emerged from these communal interactions and tied together the online and offline life. Boellstorff's (2008) interviews with players of *Second Life* echo this sentiment. One of his participants stated that "they had no problem talking to a complete stranger simply because they [had] spent a lot of time in *Second Life* doing the same thing" (pg. 121) While not explicitly describing altruistic behaviors, the player showcases how positive reciprocal interactions within with others in online spaces can induce reciprocal changes in player behavior both in real-life as well as in the virtual setting.

When asked to describe these unwritten rules of altruism in *Fallout 76* gameplay, all of my respondents answered that they treat lower levels the way they were treated when they first started playing the game. Whether it be through small acts like giving the lower level a small gift or spending a great deal of time aiding the lower level, all of them treated the lower leveled players with unrelenting generosity and altruism. (See *figure 4*). Another player, Jeff, who has been playing the game since its release, had a similar instance with someone who happened to be a slightly higher level:

I was lootin' in Flatwoods and I was in a church and I was level three or four or five or something. And I had nothing on me, probably like a stinky little pistol. And this guy just rolls up. And this was when I was playing on the Xbox at the time, and so I got a direct message. He's like, 'here's a bunch of stuff, it's on the ground. Good luck.' And so like that was like a little act of kindness that kind of started me off in the game. That's my first, I guess like real player interaction, random player interaction. And it was a positive one which kind of, like made me, you know, think for an apocalyptic game, there's definitely a lot of good.

Originally, Jeff had caught my attention because of their violent behavior towards NPCs and players within the game. However, it seems that this situation of altruism was motivated by a sense of *platform performance* (Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013, pg. 108). Platform performance is the specific way in which the community functions with one another on that particular platform. In this case, this begins to facilitate the way in which to platform perform within the online Fallout community. The players quickly find out that to appropriately conduct themselves in the community is by generating more altruistic communal behavior. This having been the only real motivating factor, outside of the good feeling of doing something nice many mentioned. The communal norm of altruism seems to showcase a stronger role in the community. Players that understand how to carry out these acts of altruism seem more ingrained into this community.

This behavioral tendency became a cultural norm for players within this setting and even spread into communal missions that randomly transpire within the game. These missions are massive events that could not be achieved by oneself, so it requires multiple players trying to achieve the goal at the same time. One such event that Jeff brought up is titled 'Radiation Rumble.' This mission tasks players with both having to defend four NPCs as well as gather a variety of materials needed to complete the mission. The materials, however, are seen as a nuisance to players who want to help in the defense process, as that is the main attraction for players. The main attraction is that it is a great way to level up quickly, as long as you are defending and not gathering the materials. "You just drop what you're doing, and you just go there." Jeff enunciated. "I see a lot of communal behavior there." He went on to describe the various ways in which the players work together to ensure that all of them get the most out of this

mission. For these missions, this sort of collaborative work is put in place by the developers. World events are events that require just about all the players in the lobby to act. With that said there are players that are strong enough to do these by themselves, but they function as outliers in this observation. This game design exhibits Goffman's (1959) theory regarding teamwork and the ways in which the actor must play their part to achieve the desired outcome. For example, players may engage in healing and reviving lower leveled players or going to gather supplies when no one else does just to complete the mission. This selfless way of playing the game is now another means of *platform performance*. Platform performance is the specific way in which the community functions with one another on that particular platform. In this case, this begins to dictate the way in which to platform perform within the online Fallout community. The players quickly find out that to appropriately conduct themselves in the community is by generating more of this altruistic communal behavior. In contrast, players that do not follow this norm are generally solo players and not associated with a 'squad.' If they are a part of a group, they quickly lose their status. Or, in Goffman's (1959) terms, this meant *losing face*.

In these circumstances, Jeff made a strong note of "betrayal" that may happen in the game. He stated that it is hard to get kicked out of a group or explicitly shooed away from other players in the game. When I inquired about what could possibly, in his mind, get someone kicked out of the group, he quickly answered simply, "betrayal." This can come in many different forms. But most readily it would be a senseless act of trying to aggravate the victimized player. For example, stealing their in-game materials and loot or damaging their in-game property. If a player is acting this way, the game has a

feature that can let other players in the lobby know by making the aggressive player “wanted” (see *figure 5*). The more violent or unruly a player is, the higher their bounty becomes. This incentivizes players to attack the aggressor and makes other players hesitant to trust “wanted” players. In the virtual world, it is hard to break down someone’s true intentions as they maneuver through the virtual space. When working as a group, in-game items need to be dispensed in equitable terms among the squad to further foster this sense of comradery. This is simply an instance of tested *mannerisms* that players have to perform as they casually engage in this style of play. Disrupting the flow of this or going against the group's norms, it seems, warrants a sort of expulsion from the group. By enacting altruism, a player can theoretically *save face* among other players and return to interacting with the community the way that the collective sees fit.

These sort of player discrepancies should not be mistaken for player-versus-players (PvPers). A PvP-er is someone who casually enjoys battling other players. These players are not to be confused or categorized with what Nardi (2010) referred to as ‘griefers.’ There is no sense of senseless betrayal. Griefers are much like internet trolls. They are individuals who seek out tormenting other players for their own amusement. These are players that Jeff would describe as betraying their fellow wastelander. In contrast, pvp-ers are groups of players who enjoy the added game feature of being able to combat one another. While it would appear that these players would exhibit the most selfish behavior toward others, they actually were seen to be the most altruistic of the whole lot of *Fallout 76* players. Gramophone made the strong note in saying that they were the most “welcoming group” and that they were “extremely wholesome.” He went on to say that they “as a whole get more personal and always

make sure to give (back) not only the loot they took from you but also a ton more with it.” What Gramophone circled around to outline was that these players were simply bored with what the game had to offer and so they were trying to forge a new sub-game to augment the original. They enjoyed the setting and wanted to remain there, but they needed some new form of stimulus to make them want to keep coming back. Overall, augmenting gameplay seems to be a real motivating factor behind the behavior for many higher level players, or lower level characters that are alternative accounts for veteran players. This thematic tendency for altruism seems to stem from the players being bored and simply wanting more within a setting they find themselves comfortable with, so they begin to generate interactions with other players online to create more depth to this virtual world. As a whole this generates the last step in blended identity and seems to alter the way in which players act both in the game and outside of it.

Conclusion

Throughout this research there were several limiting factors. The first is simply the way in which the voice chat can be outright turned off for some players, or comparatively switched so that they can only talk with their team. This made it hard to gain the attention of some players. For this I played solely on my computer. However, this game is also available on Xbox and PlayStation. In both of the latter options, they have a user interface that allows for instant messaging players met online.

Unfortunately, Fallout on the computer does not carry the same mechanics. I would have to gain contact access to their personal accounts outside of the game to be able to

send them a simple direct message. This most certainly prevented many interviews and conversations. Especially if the players failed to take note of my camp sign.

Second is simply the player gender demographic that I interacted with. All of the interviewees above were perceived as male. There were a few notable instances in which potential female players tried to converse with me, however they generally kept the conversation brief and simply commented on some random commodity within the interview booth. In one case, a female player really showcased her offline persona recreated into the virtual space. However, there was simply no way to make her anonymous given the information that I would wish to disclose. So regretfully, I had to cut that out of the analysis. Then, in a few instances, I ran into players that were a couple in real life and had come to find out that they had actually started the game together and were having a shared experience of exploring this world. However, the female of the couple would always be gated behind the male counterpart. This certainly can suggest a lot about gender differences within the game. However, they would quickly go back to their own devices when I tried to ask the female questions. In regards to gender demographics this is something I aim to break into and try to see if the tendencies that emerged through this research are replicable.

Despite my presumptions, Fallout 76 generates a plethora of altruistic behavior and prosocial in-game cultural norms. Those playing the game are not as ruthless as I initially believed. Similarly, it seems as though players brought their offline selves into this online virtual realm and found new outlets for how to go through this open-ended and open-world RPG, which as a whole was a positive platform for engaging in healthy community activities. Player immersion helped facilitate this as it further drove this

feeling that they were, unbeknownst to them, performing the various norms that this culture dictates is necessary. As it goes, this essence of immersion seems to coexist with this altruistic hegemony. In an age when technological immersion does not seem to be on the downgrade this could be a viable solution while trying to grapple with the various concepts of *self*, *blended identity and self*, as well as the over all *productization of self*. Overall, players within Fallout 76, much like Second Life and those that belong to Rolling Stones and/or Phish fan pages, are altered through their time spent in their desired online space. The steps go as follows; the player enters the virtual space with an unconscious idea of who their self is. They then recreate this image using the parameters given by the game itself, and after exposure to the online space the player begins to adapt their image to fit the items within the setting. Lastly, the players attitude and behavior will have been altered as a side effect of the communal norms present for that online setting. In the case of Fallout 76, most players grow an altruistic characteristic that seems to span into their offline lives.

Gallery



Figure 1. A photo of my interview booth.



Figure 2. My point of view as a random player approaches my interview booth.



Figure 3. A formal interview in a more private location with my two primary informants. (Left to Right: Myself, Hawthorne, Gramophone).



Figure 4. A higher level player giving a gift to a level one as they start the game.



Figure 5. An icon on the in-game map showing a “Wanted” player. Adapted from *Vault 76 handbook: Appalachia's most wanted*. Fallout 76. (2018). Retrieved 2023, from <https://fallout.bethesda.net/en/article/sVzDrT51zqYqCGuem8IWC/fallout-76-vault-76-handbook-appalachia%27s-most-wanted>

Footnotes

1. World of Warcraft is a massive multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) that situates the player in a hyper-fantasy realm that forces the players to enact role-playing.
2. Platform performance is simply the ways in which we act within a certain context. For example: A professor acts differently in front of a class as they would in front of their family. The performance changes depending on the platform.
3. One important voice chat element to note that separates this game from other game mechanics is that the voice chat is peripheral. The ways in which the players' voices are heard are similar to how we would hear them in the physical realm. This created a very unique way of generating real-time conversations that felt that much more immersive.
4. This method was also deployed to attempt to keep track of players that were spending real-life currency to acquire items, those who are actively affiliating with

certain NPC factions through attire, and other potential clauses behind their clothing choice.

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