

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# The Video Game Experience as “True” Identification: A Theory of Enjoyable Alterations of Players’ Self-Perception

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*This article introduces an explication of video game players’ identification with a game character or role that is based on social–psychological models of self-perception. Contrasting with conventional (“dyadic”) notions of media user–character relationships (e.g., parasocial interaction or affective disposition theory), (“monadic”) video game identification is defined as a temporal shift of players’ self-perception through adoption of valued properties of the game character. Implications for media enjoyment, the measurement of identification, and media effects are discussed.*

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Audience responses to people in the media receive much attention in contemporary communication research. The attention is justified by the fact that many products of mass communication—newscasts, talk shows, movies, video games, and many more—present people, rely on performing characters, and/or are centered around characters. In particular, entertainment researchers often explore the way people respond to media characters and have found such responses to be key drivers of enjoyment experiences (e.g., Cohen, 2006; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Schramm, 2006a; Zillmann, 2006). In this article, the character-based mechanics of media enjoyment are reviewed and applied to (players of) video games. Clearly, video games have conquered a central position in today’s landscape of entertainment media, and their attributes—most importantly, *interactivity*—suggest that existing theoretical accounts of media enjoyment be reconsidered (Sherry, 2004; Vorderer & Bryant, 2006). This contribution proposes an alternative to observation-based models of audience–character relationships developed in research on noninteractive entertainment such as novels or television. The goal of this proposition is to achieve

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a better theoretical fit to the video game experience. Our argument is that the way players deal with characters or social roles in video games is best understood as *identification*. We explicate a new formulation of identification in video games that is based on social–psychological models of self-perception and self-concept. Subsequently, we discuss the implications of video game identification for research on video game enjoyment and various domains of game effects.

### **Media users as observers: A brief review of theories of audience response to noninteractive media characters**

Observing other people who are watching television inevitably leads to descriptions of viewers witnessing the events on the screen, including the viewers' subjective responses to TV characters. Early explication of *parasocial interaction* (Horton & Wohl, 1956) asserts that media characters present simulations of real-life social interactions to which viewers intuitively respond, as if they are acting within a real social setting (Giles, 2002). The resulting virtual-social experience is the major gratification that comes out of observing media characters performing on screen, for instance, as an instrument to overcome real-life loneliness (Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Rubin, Perse, & Powell, 1985).

Similarly, Zillmann's approach to viewers' responses to people-centered media messages elaborates a "witness" (2006, p. 220) perspective. His disposition-based theories propose that viewers judge the properties and actions of media characters (Raney, 2006). In crime drama, morality is the primary dimension of these judgments (Raney, 2005). Viewers then display specific emotional responses to media characters that depend on the moral judgment they made. Positively evaluated characters receive viewers' empathy (Zillmann, 1991, 2006); if viewers judge a character to be morally "bad," in contrast, Zillmann's theories expect counterempathy to occur. That is, viewers hope that negative events happen to deserving media characters (e.g., punishment, humiliation). Strong experimental evidence supports the notion that televised drama is entertaining because of viewers' emotional response patterns described in Zillmann's theory (e.g., Zillmann, 1996). In the current context, this body of research is thus an important argument for the validity of observation-based models of audience–character relationships: Viewers observe characters, evaluate them, and respond in specific emotional (enjoyable) ways.

A third recent approach to viewer responses to media characters is the PeFIC model (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005), which is anchored in art perception and aesthetics as well as in social and emotional psychology. The model conceives of the affect system as separate positive and negative substrates rather than one bipolar system and thus assumes that both involvement with and distance to a character may occur at the same time. PeFIC is therefore similar to the previously mentioned models concerning the proposition of audience responses (or attitudes) toward media characters as *dyadic*. That is, viewers or media users perceive a social distinction between themselves (the observers) and the media characters.

Finally, transportation theory (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004, p. 319) denotes that media users immersed in mediated narratives are likely to “develop a strong sense of connection or familiarity with characters encountered repeatedly or continuously over time.” The theory’s elements that focus on audience–character relationships thus also suggest that media users maintain a perceived difference between themselves, who are “transported” into a story, and the characters, who are “already in the story.”

In sum, the reviewed conceptual approaches describe the role of media users as witnesses, observers, and evaluators of what media characters look like, do, and say. This understanding still allows variation in the perceived distance between a media user as observer and a media character: The reviewed concepts explicitly or implicitly foresee that media users exercise active “distance management” (e.g., they might not allow themselves to feel empathetic with a character, see the PeFIC model: Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Moreover, media techniques of character portrayal can affect the perceived distance between audience and character (e.g., the language strategies of the “lonesome Gal” discussed by Horton & Wohl, 1956). Overall, however, the reviewed well-recognized theories of user–character relationships are convergent in the sense that the media user is modeled to remain (also in her own mental representation of the exposure situation) as herself, an individual distinct from the media character.

### **Media users as agents: Arguments for structural differences between user responses to media characters in interactive and noninteractive entertainment**

The reviewed dyadic concepts of audience responses to media characters have received substantial empirical support, especially from television research (e.g., Chory-Assad & Yanen, 2005; Rubin et al., 1985). However, the tremendous popularity of video games (Vorderer & Bryant, 2006) and the structural differences between them and “old entertainment media” justify a critical reflection on the viability of observation-based (or dyadic) models of audience–character relationships in the context of interactive entertainment.

In contrast to noninteractive entertainment media such as novels or films, video games do not only display-mediated environments in which characters perform, but they also enable and invite users to act by themselves in the environment and to become an integral part of the mediated world. Many video games include voluminous narrative elements that assign a certain role to players (Klimmt, 2003), such as the role of a sportsman, a military commander, or an adventure heroine such as “Lara Croft”.<sup>TM</sup> The way players “fill in” the role offered to them shapes the properties and course of the game, which implies that players are not merely observers of the media environment (and of the media characters in it) as they are in television settings, but that they actively participate in the story unfolding on screen (Vorderer, 2000). Through interactivity, then, video games (partly) override the distance between media users and media characters: Players either directly control one specific character or take on a social role represented in the game world (Klimmt,

2003). In both cases, players do not observe autonomous social entities performing on screen, but they *make* characters perform or actually perform themselves. The concept of presence (e.g., Wirth et al., 2007), the perceived spatial immersion into a mediated environment, has been applied to video games (Tamborini & Skalski, 2006) and has been linked to players' interactive connection with the game elements as well as the multimodal (visual, auditory, tactile) presentation of the game world. These theoretical lines of thinking support the argument that the experience of playing an interactive video game differs fundamentally from conventional, noninteractive media experiences in the sense that mere observation of characters or events is not a convincing description of game players' "audience role."

Instead of providing opportunities to follow autonomous characters' actions, playing video games simulates the circumstances of *being* a media character (or holding a social role), for instance, of being a war hero or a police officer. Video games thus seem to facilitate a nondyadic or *monadic* user–character relationship in the sense that players do not perceive the game (main) character as a social entity distinct from themselves, but experience a merging of their own self and the game protagonist. This understanding of a monadic user–character relationship converges with the concept of *identification*. Therefore, the relevant literature is briefly reviewed before we explicate a specific notion of identification in the context of interactive video games.

### **Nondyadic user–character relationships: A review of identification theories**

Several lines of theoretical and empirical research have addressed viewer and reader identification with media characters. Considerable terminological and conceptual heterogeneity in the use of "identification" has resulted from the different approaches. Oatley (1994, 1999) argues that readers identify with a novel's protagonist in the sense that they "run" the cognitions and emotions occurring in the protagonist (as far as they are described in the novel) on their own emotional and cognitive processors ("simulation theory"). Oatley's metaphoric explication of identification thus implies that readers internalize the protagonist's condition through imaginative processes. Cognitive and affective experiences from readers' real lives that are similar to the protagonist's internal state described by the novel "help" readers enter the cognitive–affective condition of the protagonist ("emotion memories"). Oatley assumes such processes of "meeting of minds" to occur in readers of literary texts because authors have the tools to let readers recognize the internal conditions of protagonists very clearly (e.g., through "stream of consciousness"-style writing such as in James Joyce's *Ulysses*). Applying this understanding of identification as mental simulation of a protagonist's internal state to television viewers' responses to screen performers seems to be difficult, however, because television is less well-suited to revealing characters' internal conditions as precisely and clearly as literary texts can.

Cohen (2001) offers a similar notion of identification and explicates a monadic user–character relationship as an imaginative process that puts the media user into the situation of the character:

While identifying with a character, an audience member imagines him- or herself being that character and replaces his or her personal identity and role as audience member with the identity and role of the character within the text. While strongly identifying, the audience member ceases to be aware of his or her social role as an audience member and temporarily (but usually repeatedly) adopts the perspective of the character with whom he or she identifies. (Cohen, 2001, p. 251)

Cohen's (2001) proposition to measure identification with questionnaire items indicates a broader, not strictly monadic conceptualization, however. For instance, the item "When character X succeeded, I felt joy, but when he or she failed, I was sad" mirrors dyadic concepts of empathy (Zillmann, 1991, see above) rather than a perceived merger of user and character identities.

A separate line of identification research has been established by Hoffner (1996) and Hoffner and Buchanan (2005). She has elaborated "wishful identification" (von Feilitzen & Linne, 1975) specifically as young viewers' "desire to be like or act like the character" (Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005, p. 325), which can be interpreted as viewers' motivation to overcome the social distinction between themselves and the (admired) media character. This survey-based approach to identification theorizes and also measures wishful identification as a process that is partly manifested in viewer behavior *outside* of the exposure situation. For example, one item of Hoffner and Buchanan's scale to measure wishful identification reads, "Sometimes I wish I could be more like him/her," referring to the target character of the survey. Research on wishful identification thus combines conceptual similarities with parasocial relationships (Giles, 2002; Klimmt et al., 2006a) and with celebrity worship (Brown, Basil, & Bocarnea, 2003; McCutcheon, Ashe, Houran, & Maltby, 2003).

In sum, there is some variance in the explications of the concept of identification. The work exemplified by Oatley, Cohen, and Hoffner and Buchanan treats the notion in different ways. Nevertheless, at least Oatley and Cohen both qualify identification as a nondyadic alternative to the well-recognized theories of audience response to media characters reviewed initially in this article. However, further theoretical elaboration of identification as a nondyadic concept appears to be necessary because (a) there is some room for interpretation of Oatley's (1994) simulation metaphor as well as of Cohen's definition of identification (which also includes dyadic processes such as empathy and perspective taking, cf. Cohen, 2001, p. 252, and above) and (b) none of the existing lines of identification theory has dealt with the issue of interactive media use, such as in video games. We therefore introduce a new explication of the concept of identification that is specifically tailored to the video game experience. We intend to resolve the variability in the scientific use of "identification" by establishing a notion that is limited to the application to the particular medium of the video game. This way, the boundaries of the concepts (e.g., theoretical distinctions from dyadic modes of audience responses to media characters) shall become more explicit, and the measurement of video game identification as a variable in communication

research (see final section of the article) is intended to become easier and more precise.

Our conceptualization refers to a psychological reconstruction of the perceived “merger” of user and character within the exposure situation and builds on social–psychological research on the self and identity processes in order to achieve clarity and a sufficient conceptual distinction from dyadic theories of user–character relationships.

## **An identity-based explication of identification**

### **Social–psychological foundation**

Our explication of identification refers to conceptualizations of “the self” advanced in social psychology (e.g., Bracken, 1995). Following Cohen’s (2001) definition, we propose that during media exposure, users adopt (parts of) the perceived identity of the target character. They perceive or imagine themselves to actually be the media character. Identification “is marked by internalizing a point of view rather than a process of projecting one’s own identity onto someone or something else” (Cohen, 2001, p. 252). We suggest that this description of the identification process should be construed as a social–psychological phenomenon related to media users’ self-perception and identity.

From the perspective of social psychology, identification is defined as a *temporary alteration* of media users’ *self-concept* through adoption of perceived characteristics of a media person. Game players who identify with James Bond, for instance, experience—for the moment of exposure—that they *are* James Bond. This means that they ascribe Bond’s salient properties, such as physical attractiveness, strength, courage, charisma, humor, social influence, and political importance, *to themselves*. For most people, their image of themselves under the condition of identification with James Bond would differ substantially from their usual self-image. After game exposure, internal processes (e.g., cognitions about the working day) and external cues (e.g., friends addressing the media user by his/her real name instead of saying “007”) will quickly realter the situational self-concept toward the original configuration.

The translation of identification with media characters as a change of media users’ self-perception implies that social–psychological research on the self needs to be imported to achieve a sound construct elaboration. “Identity and the self” has evolved as an enormous field of inquiry in social psychology (e.g., Leary & Price, 2003). This work has revealed that people’s self-perceptions are highly complex, multidimensional, and dynamic. Various lines of research address the influence of situational factors on people’s short-term self-construal. For instance, mood has been found to affect the way people perceive themselves and which of these perceived properties are salient (e.g., Sedikides, 1992). DeMarree, Wheeler, and Petty (2005) reported that priming processes affected respondents’ self-perceptions and related behaviors, especially for individuals with a low level of self-monitoring. From such evidence we derive the assumption that media (or specifically: video game)

characters convey self-relevant information to receivers, which means that the salient properties of the media characters can be—in the case of identification with a game character—integrated into media users' momentary self-perception. In this regard, the finding reported by DeMarree et al. that such priming of identity characteristics is stronger in people with low self-monitoring is interesting because Cohen's explication of identification includes media users' "loss of self-awareness" (Cohen, 2001, p. 251). This contention is compatible with DeMarree et al.'s results on identity priming in the sense that media users who are focused on a media character do not pay attention to their momentary self (low self-monitoring). This would then function as a precondition for inclusion of media character properties into the self-perception during game exposure. Thus, the metaphor of identification as the perceived "merger" of player and game character can conceptually be resolved as a temporary change of players' self-perception through adoption of salient properties of the game character.

Conceptual and empirical support for the assumption of such a temporary identity shift comes from social–psychological research published by Goldstein and Cialdini (2007). They note, "findings from a number of studies support the supposition that individuals who feel a sense of shared, merged, or interconnected personal identities with another see themselves as possessing many of the stable personality traits possessed by the other" (Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007, p. 403). Moreover, they demonstrate that self-perceptions change in people who get to know a person and are instructed to take on her perspective. Specifically, participants who read an interview with a target person described themselves as more similar to this target person than the control group. This line of research thus supports the general notion that self-perceptions can (situationally) include attributes perceived in (close) others, which is a strong empirical argument for our proposition of identification as a shift in media users' self-perception.

The suggested reconstruction of identification as an alteration of game players' self-perception can be further specified by using social–psychological terms of the mind as an organization of propositional networks (e.g., Strack & Deutsch, 2004). From this perspective, a change of the self-concept means that the structure of concepts with which the self is associated changes: Identification can be expressed as temporarily increased activation of associations between players' concept of "self" and concepts that describe the target person (media character). For instance, the association "I—beautiful" would be activated when a (female) player identifies with a physically attractive female character. Identification with game protagonists thus implies that associations between media users' concept of self and attributes of the target character are activated and strengthened, whereas associations between media users' self and concepts that are usually strongly linked to the self are not activated (or activated only to a lesser extent). Such activation processes can thus occur without conscious control or awareness of players, which has interesting implications for the measurement of identification (see the discussion section at the end of this article).



### Application to the video game experience

The conceptualization of identification as a merger of players' self-concept with perceived attributes of the target character is compatible with Oatley's (1999) understanding of identification and may thus hold empirical relevance also for the experience of reading stories. However, we suggest that identification as a temporary shift of users' self-concept is especially likely to occur in users of interactive entertainment, especially narrative-driven video games (see also Klimmt, 2003), and therefore limit our concept explication to the video game experience.

Most contemporary games present rich information on the character or the role that the player is intended to control or occupy, respectively. For instance, in first-person-shooters (FPS; Schneider, Lang, Shin, & Bradley, 2004), narrative and visual details are given to illustrate the setting of a war hero fighting against enemy troops or hordes. Identification with the character/role is visually cued in these games (as well as in other genres with first-person view onto the game world) because players look into the game world through their character's eyes. Most importantly, however, the interactive control of the game character (or the game properties in those cases where there is no individual character to control) establishes a strong link between the player and his or her character or action role (Klimmt, 2003; Klimmt, Hartmann, & Frey, 2007; Vorderer, 2000). Therefore, it is concluded that identification with game characters or a specified action role is likely to occur in video game players.

If the outlined understanding of identification is applied to video game players, the gaming experience would induce players to change their self-concept toward the properties of the character they steer or the action role they enter during game play. For example, FPS players would include properties of the soldier they "are" in the game world into their momentary self-perception. They would, as a consequence, perceive themselves as being more courageous, stressed, cautious, aggressive, violent, dutiful, etc., than they would perceive themselves to be under "normal" circumstances, that is, without the experience within an FPS video game. Due to the direct link between players and characters that video game interactivity facilitates, it is reasonable to assume that very quick and profound alterations of players' self-perception happen through identification. This process may occur through automatic responses to the gaming situation and be sustainable throughout the game session as self-relevant information is experienced continuously with the ongoing game.

We expand our explication of video game identification by discussing some process characteristics of "identifying" and examining conceptual boundaries and overlaps with alternative terms and concepts (we thank three anonymous reviewers for their suggestions in this regard). First, it is important to clarify video game identification as a highly *selective* process. Even if the experienced merger of player and character identity occurs rapidly and intuitively, we argue that identification only covers some personality dimensions, but does not imply a full identity replacement in the sense that players forget everything about their real-life self when identifying with a game protagonist. Most importantly, dimensions on which players can "import" character attributes into their momentary self-perception are limited by



media technology. For instance, the lack of full-body tactile feedback lowers complete “presence” in the game world (Wirth et al., 2007) and thus leaves some indication of separation between players’ actual self and the game protagonist. Active thinking (“suspension of disbelief”) may render such differences less important (Wirth et al., 2007), but it is still less likely that players adopt state variables of the game character that are not transmitted through game technology. Physical pain, hunger, and tiredness are thus argued to not be dimensions of the players’ self-character synthesis. This may change with the advent of future entertainment systems (Murray, 1997), but concerning the past and current generations of video game technology, we suggest identification processes to be constrained by symbolic rather than physical links between game characters and players.

In turn, this renders cognition-based dimensions of self-perceptions, such as goals (Cohen, 2001), attitudes, and evaluations, as well as social dimensions, such as attractiveness, successfulness, and respect by others, as key dimensions of the identity merger between player and game protagonist. Players receive and produce information about these dimensions of character attributes continuously through watching, listening, and making the character act in the game world. An episode in which a player controlling the action hero “Max Payne”<sup>TM</sup> defeats a group of hostile urban gang representatives, for instance, offers material for a player’s self-concept alteration on dimensions like courage, dexterity, moral integrity, and success (which is the core of our understanding of identification). Such experience may also change the player’s emotions like anxiety, stress, and anger level toward the levels the game character is displaying (or assumed by the player to hold) in that situation. But identification is not likely to cover physical dimensions such as pain or breathlessness. From this perspective, identification is therefore a selective phenomenon that does not fully equalize a game character and players’ self-perception.

Selectivity of identification dimensions also relates to the authenticity of the game experience. One could argue that reality-like game environments and characters are more likely to foster alteration of players’ self-perception, as the attributes mirror players’ real-life experiences and can thus be connected to players’ self more easily. In turn, fictional–fantastic characters (probably the majority of the characters in popular video games) would be less capable of facilitating temporary identity shifts in players (we thank an anonymous reviewer for this comment). However, we argue that players can also “benefit” in terms of identification and its entertainment value (see next section) from highly implausible, unrealistic characters, such as dwarfs in “World of Warcraft”.<sup>TM</sup> In such cases, the change of self-perception may only occur on one narrowly defined dimension (such as power or integrity) that even implausible characters can display in a salient and consistent manner. While the issue of perceived realism (Shapiro, Pena-Herborn, & Hancock, 2006) deserves more conceptual and empirical inquiry in the present context, we suggest that due to selectivity of identification processes, plausibility versus fictionality is less relevant concerning the likelihood that identification will occur.

Second, video game identification is argued to be unstable over time. Cohen (2001) has argued for identification as a fleeting experience, and Vorderer (1993) has found that media users are capable of shifting involvement levels dynamically (and instrumentally). That is, a moment of intense identification and substantial change of self-perception through adoption of character attributes may be followed by an episode of greater perceived distance between the player and character. For example, in an FPS episode, the character may die. In this case, the target for identification processes is temporarily unavailable, which necessarily will make players return to real-world self-perceptions (e.g., Ravaja, Turpeinen, Saari, Puttonen, & Keltikangas-Järvinen, 2008). Players will notice their insufficient performance that made the character die from enemy bullets and reflect on the self-perception dimension of competence. Once the character has been revived and players try again, strong identification may reoccur in the subsequent episode. So we argue that although video game identification can reach levels of profound temporal identity shifts, identification intensity is by no means stable throughout game play or independent of players' active distance management (see introduction section on observation-based approaches). In this sense, our identification concept converges with those explications of Presence that emphasize temporal dynamics and intensity variations of the experience (e.g., Wirth et al., 2007).

Selectivity and variability of identification are not only affected by media technology and situation dynamics, but also by players' motivation. Players are capable of affecting the dimensions on which they *want* to identify with a game character. The motivation to focus on one or a few personality dimensions, within which a person wants to experience conditions that are different from normal, primarily serves the purpose of maximizing enjoyment (see next section). Players may also want to limit identification (in terms of affected self domains or in terms of identification intensity) to avoid undesired experiences. For instance, players of "Grand Theft Auto"<sup>TM</sup> games almost inevitably face situations in which morally inappropriate actions serve game goals such as success or survival. While video game players have been found to creatively manage moral concern (Klimmt, Schmid, Nosper, Hartmann, & Vorderer, 2006), there remains a risk of negative experience through immorality. To avoid such negative experience and preserve media enjoyment, players may focus on character dimensions other than morality (e.g., dexterity, assertiveness) for temporal shifts in their self-perceptions. This does not imply, however, that undesired changes in self-perception can be suppressed—automatic information processing such as identity priming (see above) may occur even if players intend to avoid identity shifts of certain qualities or intensities. The capability to control how much identification occurs probably depends on developmental factors and media literacy (which is also connected to development). Adult players should be able to exercise more mental control over shifts in self-experiences (e.g., in terms of meta-cognition such as evaluations of their current self-perception) than children (Flavell, 1979).

Finally, our explication of video game identification displays similarities with common understandings of *roleplay*, so we seek further conceptual clarification by

discussing the relationship between video game identification and roleplaying. This debate is specifically relevant to video game identification, as one important game genre that is supposed to facilitate strong identification with characters or roles is called “Role Playing Games” (RPG; see, for instance, Yee, 2007). Similar to the concept of identification, there are different perspectives and definitions of roleplay available. The psychological perspective emphasizes the act of simulating someone (or something) different from a person’s normal identity. For example, according to Curry and Arnaud (1974, p. 274), “roleplay occurs when the child transforms himself in pretend play to be a person or object other than himself, as indicated by his verbal and/or motoric enactment of his perception of that role.” Similarly, Hamilton (1976) differentiates dimensions of roleplay that relate to the content of identity simulation (e.g., playing the role of another person vs. playing the role of oneself in a different condition) and the mode of simulation (e.g., mere imagination vs. actual behavior). In contrast, a sociological perspective emphasizes the element of meeting social requirements through roleplay. Roleplay is understood as the adoption of behaviors considered to be “appropriate” in a given social context and effective for the fulfillment of social stakeholders’ expectations (e.g., Kelley, Osbourne, & Hendrick, 1974). For instance, the social situation of being a teacher in a classroom demands the execution of a specific set of behaviors (including the suppression of alternative behaviors). Rather than an act of simulation, this perspective implies roleplay as an act of self-adjustment to social forces.

Our account of video game identification seems to be exchangeable with the notion of roleplay as active identity simulation, primarily because game interactivity leaves degrees of freedom to the player in terms of how she is acting out the character or role assigned to her. Because the game provides immediate feedback to player action (Klimmt et al., 2007), playing video games is also about self-adjustment to social forces: If players do not adopt behaviors compatible with what the game world expects from them, they will receive negative feedback such as failure or boredom. Clearly, identification and the concept of roleplay converge as theoretical construals of the video game experience.

Given the broad definitions of roleplay and our focused explication of video game identification, it is difficult to mark sharp conceptual boundaries between roleplay and identification. We propose one conceptual distinction between our explication of video game identification and (digital) roleplaying. This distinction refers to the issue of degrees of freedom in individual agents’ activity of self-alteration:

- The least degrees of freedom are available to readers who “identify” with a story character (“meeting of minds”; cf. Oatley, 1999). Because the reader cannot affect any attributes or actions of the target character, the target character appears as a complete social entity of her/his own right, which is most likely to result in observation-based audience responses such as empathy and/or parasocial interaction (see second section above).

- In contrast, video game characters or roles represent a mixture of fixed attributes prescribed by the medium and flexible attributes that can be affected by players' individual decisions. For example, in the "Call of Duty"<sup>TM</sup> FPS series, fixed attributes of the game protagonist are the occupation of the soldier, the story and conflicts he is involved in, and the military objectives assigned to him. Player-affected attributes are, among others, the assertiveness, remorse(lessness), precision, and tactical intelligence with which the protagonist proceeds through the war stories told in the game. Identification with the game character is thus an active process, as players do have limited influence on the attributes and actions of the target character. Still, playing a video game implies adherence to predefined rules, objectives, and norms. Players are not completely free in their decisions about the target character and his circumstances but also depend on game developers' decisions concerning the character. Video game identification thus means both adopting fixed attributes of the target character and creating parts of these attributes through individual decisions. The degrees of freedom in the production of players' altered self-experience are thus higher in video game identification than story reading.
- In free roleplay, finally, agents hold the most degrees of freedom, as the boundaries of the target character, her attributes and actions, are not made explicit by an author or developer. These boundaries merely depend on the player's decisions of how the target role (e.g., the role of a police officer) is to be filled. Roleplayers do not need to consider any authorial decisions or game rules. They make all decisions and rules by themselves. Shifts of self-perceptions that arise from free roleplay, then, are fully imaginative–constructive acts that solely result from the agents' fantasy (Curry & Arnaud, 1974).

From this degrees-of-freedom perspective, the term identification is best suited for the video game experience, as it combines predefined character attributes that players (can) adopt for their self-perception with individual construction of character/self-attributes in the moment of exposure. Noninteractive media experiences, in contrast, only offer fully predefined target characters (and thus no user–character connection facilitated through consequential user decisions). Free roleplay does not offer predefined character attributes at all, but leaves all-important decisions about the target character to the player.

A broader understanding of roleplay (e.g., Hamilton, 1976) would question this continuum of degrees of freedom in self-altering activities. From such a perspective, all modes differentiated here (identification with a novel or TV character, identification in video games, and free roleplay) would be manifestations of roleplaying. From a communication perspective, however, the distinction is useful to explain the specific appeal of game enjoyment (see next section), as video game play is the experiential synthesis of individual playful behavior and mass communication reception (Klimmt, 2001; Murray, 1997; Sherry, 2004).

Empirical research that lends support to our explication of video game identification is sparse. Still, the existing studies support our assumptions well. McDonald and Kim (2001) investigated young game players and found a strong sense of identification (however with some conceptual overlap of dyadic and monadic perspectives) with game characters (“When I die, I feel small”). Hefner, Klimmt, and Vorderer (2007) provided a direct test of the importance of video game interactivity for character identification: In their experiment, participants either played an FPS or merely watched a video recording of the same game; thus, interactivity was manipulated. Participants who played the game by themselves produced significantly higher identification scores afterward than respondents who had only observed game events without interactive participation. Hence, there is some initial empirical evidence available to support the proposition of video games’ specific capacity to elicit identification processes in players.

In sum, our account of player responses to game protagonists as a process of identification mirrors the etymology of the term nicely. “Identification” may be translated from Latin as “making oneself the same as someone or something.” The German “Duden” Dictionary notes that “identification” means “emotionally making oneself equal with another person or group and adopting her/his/their motives and ideals into one’s Self” (Drosdowski, 1982, p. 327, translation by authors). The elaboration of video game identification as players adopting character attributes to their temporary self-perception represents this synthesis of oneself and “the other” well. Given that the term identification has been applied to different media experiences in the past (see above), we argue that models of interactive video game experiences can claim the utility of “identification” with an especially strong legitimization: As players actively connect to the character (through controls and commands), the link between character and players’ self is, in our view, more direct, close, and evident than for other media examples, such as watching TV characters. Therefore, we suggest considering the video game experience as the “true” occurrence of identification (see also conclusion section).

### **Identification and media enjoyment: Altered self-perceptions reduce self-discrepancies**

Our approach to identification with video game characters can explain why identification is enjoyable for many players. Drawing back to escapism research (Katz & Foulkes, 1962), identification as temporary change of players’ self-perception is assumed to serve the desire to evade troublesome real-life circumstances. Such problems frequently arise from people’s recognition of themselves as different from the self they idealize or strive for (self-discrepancy; cf. Higgins, 1987). For instance, conceptions of someone’s ideal self may include the notion of being courageous, while the person’s real behavior in a situation of conflict with a supervisor is not very courageous. The detection of differences between actual self and desired (ideal)

self causes negative emotions such as shame or guilt (Gonnerman, Parker, Lavine, & Huff, 2000; Higgins, 1987).

The enjoyment of identification with a game character can thus be theoretically grounded in the reduction of self-discrepancy for the duration of game exposure. A player who perceives himself as less courageous than he actually wants to be (high self-discrepancy on the dimension of courage) can reduce his self-discrepancy by identifying with—that is, adopting the salient properties of—a courageous game character such as James Bond. For the period of identification with James Bond, the self-perception of the media user is altered toward the characteristics of Bond, including an increased level of courage. Identification with James Bond thus leads to a temporarily higher self-ascribed level of courage, which consequently reduces or even eliminates the self-discrepancy (on this dimension). Such reductions or complete resolutions of self-discrepancies are accompanied by positive experiences due to increased self-esteem (Higgins, 1987; Moretti & Higgins, 1990), which would then contribute to video game enjoyment. Reduction of self-discrepancy achieved through identification with a game character that is more close to the ideal self is thus one “route” of escapism in the sense of Katz and Foulkes (1962). Interestingly, Katz and Foulkes had already mentioned “identification” as an underlying process of escapist media use. This approach is in line with the concept of “possible selves,” introduced by Markus and Nurius (1986). “Possible selves represent individuals’ ideas of what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming” (Markus & Nurius, 1986, p. 954). If, for example, the possible selves of a male adolescent include the idea of being a brave and strong person, and if he regards this specific possible self as desirable (which is likely for that case), he would probably be willing to adopt the attributes of strength and braveness in his momentary self-representation. A video game offering the opportunity to activate the “brave and strong” possible self would thus evoke a pleasurable experience of “being like one wants to be.”

Compared to the use of noninteractive media, reducing self-discrepancy through video game identification holds significant advantages in terms of enjoyment value. First, as video game characters offer a mixture of fixed elements to integrate in players’ self-perception and flexible elements that players can individualize (see previous section), the probability that the reduction of self-discrepancy relates to *relevant* domains of self-perception (Boldero & Francis, 2000) is higher than if TV viewers identify with a complete TV protagonist who does not leave room for personalization in terms of self-perceptions. Second, due to the interactivity of game play, players’ self-experiences are highly “convincing” in the sense that they result from players’ own actions in a simulated world instead of mere imagination (as in free roleplay) or mere observation of a TV character’s actions (as when watching TV). If players temporarily reduce self-discrepancies through video game identification, the enjoyable self-experience is therefore argued to be more profound and sustainable compared to noninteractive modes of media entertainment.



Reduced self-discrepancy as an explanation for the enjoyment of video game identification connects nicely with Jansz's (2005) theoretical explanation of violent video games' appeal to young males. Jansz suggests that simulated emotional experiences of masculine identity are a major goal of male adolescents who play violent video games. Our identity-based explication of identification fits well with this understanding, as the identity work adolescents perform with violent video games can be construed as managing self-discrepancies in terms of (hyper)masculinity. Playing violent games allows them to temporarily shift self-perceptions along the dimension of masculinity and try out "how it feels" to be close or far away from an ideal super-masculine identity (see also Kirsh, 2003).

Several studies provide empirical support for the hypothesized connections between identification, reduction of self-discrepancy, and media enjoyment. Research on wishful identification (see Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005, for a recent summary) has found that the desire to be similar to or like a media character is increased by generally valued attributes of a media character such as success and social support by other characters. This finding connects to the assumption that adopting media character attributes in one's self-concept (i.e., identification, as explicated above) reduces self-discrepancy, as valued attributes such as success and receiving support from others are likely to differ between media users' self-perceptions and media characters designed to be appealing. Results reported by Sherry, Lucas, Greenberg, and Lachlan (2006) can be explained in a similar way: They found "fantasy" (e.g., "I play video games because they let me do things I can't do in real life") to be a relevant motivator of video game play (see also Malone, 1981).

More specific evidence for the link between entertainment use and reduction of self-discrepancy comes from studies reported in social psychology. Moskalenko and Heine (2003) found that watching television reduces perceived self-discrepancy and thus also decreases negative self-evaluations. Their explanation focuses on distraction processes rather than identification in our sense, however: According to the authors, watching TV helps people avoid reflection on their self-discrepancies and thus facilitates positive conditions of subjective self-awareness (see also Henning & Vorderer, 2001).

Bessière, Seay, and Kiesler (2007) have published the most direct empirical support for the proposed relationship between video game identification, reduction of self-discrepancy, and game enjoyment. They asked respondents about their actual self, their ideal self, and the personality of their "World of Warcraft"<sup>TM</sup> video game character, in each case concerning the same set of personality dimensions. Findings indicate that the game character is more similar to players' ideal self than to their actual self, which suggests that identification with a game character does indeed reduce self-discrepancy.

Whereas initial evidence is available on the relationship between video game identification, reduced self-discrepancy, and game enjoyment, the interplay between game *achievement*, identification, and the fun of gaming is less well-understood. Successful game play has been argued to fuel game enjoyment (Klimmt & Hartmann,



2006; Sherry, 2004). However, no empirical results have been published so far that address the possibility that (a) players reach the strongest identification in the moment of success (i.e., when the “power” dimension of their heroic game character is most salient) and/or (b) identification follows game success in the sense that players admit alterations of their self-perception mostly when playing games that they can master to a satisfying degree. The justification of this assumption is that a lack of mastery could cause permanent dissociation between players’ self and game character (e.g., the character would “die” frequently and terminate identification) and thus eliminate game enjoyment. Without mastery, neither achievement-based nor identification-based game enjoyment would occur.

## Conclusions

The present article has linked the concept of identification with media characters to social–psychological accounts of self-perceptions in order to derive an explication of identification that is explicitly designed to mirror video game players’ cognitive and affective responses to interactive playing situations. The construction of video game identification as a process of altered self-perception allows us to use and investigate identification as an alternative to dyadic concepts of user responses to media characters such as empathy (Zillmann, 1991), parasocial interaction (Horton & Wohl, 1956), and the PeFIC model (Konijn & Hoorn, 2005). Moreover, it represents a chance to resolve past terminological and conceptual confusions concerning “identification,” as the psychological process in our explication is etymologically compatible with “identification” (see explication section) and the conceptual boundaries of identification are set explicitly with regard to the video game experience. Similar accounts may be pursued to examine the theoretical plausibility and increase the conceptual precision for “identification” in other domains such as TV appreciation (Cohen, 2001). This way, communication theory may advance toward sorting out those modes of media enjoyment that belong to the categories of monadic versus dyadic experiences of media characters and also toward resolving issues of conceptual convergences, such as the relationship between video game identification and Presence in video games (Tamborini & Skalski, 2006). While there is some initial evidence that supports our propositions concerning video game identification, a rigid empirical research line is required to back up the conceptual integration and guide future model enhancement. We therefore draw our remaining conclusions first in terms of empirical research on video game identification and then address conceptual implications for entertainment media effects and society at large.

The construal of identification in video games as altered self-perception of players allows us to utilize methodologies from social psychology to test the resulting assumptions. If players perceive themselves to temporarily “become” a media character, such processes might be accessible for methods of self-description (e.g., through attribute lists similar to self-report measures of affect, see Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988, or general attributes lists as used by Goldstein & Cialdini, 2007).

Scholars in social psychology have advanced alternative measures for social–cognitive processes that might be even more useful to measure identification. The so-called implicit measures (DeHouwer, 2006; Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998) may assess (temporarily activated) associations between “self” and other concepts that refer to salient attributes of the game character with which a person is or has been identifying. Thus, although the relevant properties and capabilities of implicit measures are still being examined (DeHouwer, 2006; Hofmann, Gschwendner, Nosek, & Schmitt, 2005), these methods could emerge as valuable tools for the assessment of identification as change of self-perceptions. In general, given the multiple relevant variables (players’ actual self, players’ ideal self, shifts in perceived self through identification, self-discrepancy, and game enjoyment), it is reasonable to aim for multimethod (and multistudy) approaches to achieve further empirical solidification of the conceptual propositions outlined in this article. Studies replicating and expanding the questionnaire-based approach of Bessièrè et al. (2007) and examining video game identification in different game genres (e.g., FPS versus strategy games) would make especially important contributions to the empirical research program.

In addition to measuring the actual shifts in players’ self-perception, there is also a need for empirical explorations of whether players can be(come) aware of their video game identification and/or identification as an automatic and even unconscious process (e.g., Bargh, 1994). This question is linked to issues of players’ abilities to affect the identification process, such as the dimensions on which they admit their self-perception to be altered through identification with a game character. It is also relevant to the explanation of game selection (e.g., Hartmann & Klimmt, 2006; Lucas & Sherry, 2004): Do players actively search for certain identification experiences and select their games according to the expected alterations of self-perceptions? Or is identification a (welcome) byproduct of game play that is subordinate to other motivations, such as flow or mastery? Finally, the question of noticeability and player reflection on identification also relates to the temporal variations of identification: Altered self-perceptions may linger between moments of players being aware of their shift in self-perception and phases of unnoticed automatic cognitions. If such temporal variation does occur, how do the different degrees of noticeability affect game enjoyment? Do experienced players display patterns of identification that are different from novice players? Does successful game play (e.g., completing a level by killing an “end-boss”) affect intensity and/or noticeability of identification (see end of previous section)? Once a solid measure of video game identification as altered self-perception has been established, these related questions can and should be addressed empirically as well.

While the empirical examination of the identification process explicated here needs to be continued and expanded, our considerations already suggest reflection on implications for game effects beyond the actual enjoyment experience and connected motivation to play video games (Vorderer & Bryant, 2006). Two pathways of conceptual relevance of video game identification for game impact appear to be interesting. One is the attitudinal and behavioral consequences of identification

changing short- and long-term self-construals in (frequent) game players. Video game identification may affect the set of players' possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and the "normal" self-construal in the sense of associations between certain concepts and "I." A recent experiment (Cin, Gibson, Zanna, Shumate, & Fong, 2007) revealed that viewers who "identified" with smoking movie protagonists displayed stronger implicit associations between "smoking" and "self," which resulted in a stronger short-term motivation to smoke. Similar consequences of identification seem to be plausible in the context of video game effects (e.g., the impact of game violence; Konijn, Bijvank, & Bushman, 2007). Therefore, both short- and long-term implications of identification as change of self-concept deserve theoretical and empirical research efforts. Hoffner's (1996) and Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) approach to "wishful identification" is an interesting foundation in this regard. The second pathway through which identification-based game effects may work relates to the motivational consequences of *increased* self-discrepancy *after* game exposure. If game enjoyment benefits from reduced self-discrepancy during game play (Higgins, 1987; see above), the end-of-game exposure is likely to direct players' attention back to a "normal" self-perception that comes with higher self-discrepancy. Game players are supposed to be capable of managing differences between game contexts and social reality (e.g., Klimmt et al., 2006), so reentry into a normal self-condition should not necessarily result in adverse emotional experiences of high self-discrepancy. However, the positive self-experience during game exposure may increase some players' motivation to reduce self-discrepancy on relevant dimensions with greater sustainability. For instance, in health communication, self-perceptions have been examined in the context of media exposure and body image (e.g., Heinberg & Thompson, 1995; Stice & Shaw, 1994; Groesz, Levine, & Murnen, 2001). Identification with a (thin) game character (that is accompanied by temporarily reduced self-discrepancy on the dimension of thinness) may contribute to players' body *dissatisfaction* outside of game situations (i.e., the self-discrepancy concerning physical properties becomes a more pressing problem), which may then feed into problematic eating behavior. So the pleasurable self-experience during game use that is facilitated through identification may affect game effect processes through the negatively valenced contrast of the "normal" self-experience after game exposure (McDonald & Kim, 2001). In this sense, players' efficacy in identity management would be the critical factor that moderates both game enjoyment and (long-term) game effects. An alternative prediction could be based on reduced self-discrepancy during game play *lasting beyond* the game experience. If video game identification were capable of narrowing the perceived gap between ideal self and actual self (e.g., on the dimension of success) for several hours after game play, this mode of video game enjoyment could transfer directly into life satisfaction and contribute to positive self-development (cf. Durkin & Barber, 2002), as a general self-perception of skill and competence would arise from game use. Clearly, the question of how self-discrepancy is affected after game play, when identification with a game character is over, deserves more empirical exploration. Other domains of identity formation beyond body

image and competence are certainly also candidate domains for positive or negative identification-based game effects and should thus be considered in thematic effects studies.

Finally, what are the implications for society at large if video games as “identity labs” are increasingly spreading to homes in industrialized and developing countries? People have always used various techniques to simulate alternate or altered identities, especially various types of play (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Mass communication has been serving the purpose of such elaboration of alternate identities or possible selves ever since its inception (e.g., radio shows like the “Lonesome Gal” offering the listener to simulate a lover’s identity; cf. Horton & Wohl, 1956). In this sense, modern mass media have always been popular as they helped people imagine themselves being closer to what (and how) they wanted to be (Katz & Foulkes, 1962). Video games, and the identification processes they facilitate, continue this escapist function of older mass media, and their interactivity seems to lift this function to a new level of effectiveness. For many of the younger generations, this mode of entertaining identity play is already more attractive than older mass media. Therefore, the general societal implication of video game identification is twofold. First, positive consequences of media escapism, such as recreation, relief of stress, and well-being (Klimmt, 2008) may occur in more users, in more situations, and in more satisfying intensities. Second, the same may be true for negative societal consequences of escapism, including addictive game play, identity confusion, and facilitation of undesired game effects such as body dissatisfaction. Communication theory can describe and explain these functions and underlying processes. The ensuing empirical research must demonstrate the validity and document the frequency and magnitude of the phenomenon. High-level conclusions in terms of transformations of society will only be possible once the short- and long-term implications of video games as personal identity laboratories have been studied with more depth and breadth.

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# La Experiencia del Video Juego como Identificación ‘Verdadera’: Una Teoría de las Alteraciones Placenteras de la Auto-Percepción de los Jugadores

## Resumen

Este artículo introduce una explicación de la identificación de los jugadores de video juego con un personaje del juego o rol que está basado en modelos sociales y psicológicos del auto percepción. Contrastando con las nociones convencionales (‘diádica’) de la relación entre el usuario de los medios y el personaje (es decir, la interacción para-social o la teoría de la disposición afectiva), (‘monódica’) la identificación del video juego está definida como un cambio temporal de la auto percepción de los jugadores a través de la adopción de propiedades valoradas del personaje del juego. Las implicaciones sobre el placer de los medios, la medición de la identificación, y los efectos de los medios son discutidos.

Palabras claves: Identificación, video juegos, interactividad, el yo, los personajes de los medios, la respuesta de la audiencia, el placer, la transportación, la presencia, la interacción para-social, y la auto-discrepancia

## **Videospiel-Erleben als “wahre” Identifikation: Eine Theorie der unterhaltsamen Wandlung der Selbstwahrnehmung von Spielern**

**Dieser Artikel betrachtet die Identifikation von Videospiel-Spielern mit den Spielcharakteren oder -rollen, die auf sozial-psychologischen Modellen der Selbstwahrnehmung beruhen. Kontrastiert mit konventionellen (,dyadischen’) Auffassungen von Mediennutzer-Charakter-Beziehungen (z.B. parasoziale Interaktion oder die Theorie der affektiven Disposition), ist eine (,monadische’) Videospiel-Identifikation als eine temporäre Verschiebung der Selbstwahrnehmung des Spielers durch die Übernahme der wertgeschätzten Eigenschaften des Spielcharakters definiert. Implikationen für Medien-Enjoyment, die Messung von Identifikation und Medienwirkungen werden diskutiert.**

**Keywords: Identifikation, Videospiele, Interaktivität, Selbst, Mediencharaktere, Publikumsreaktion, Enjoyment, Transportation, Präsenz, parasoziale Interaktion, Selbst-Zwiespalt**

L'expérience du jeu vidéo comme identification « réelle » : Une théorie des altérations  
plaisantes de la perception de soi des joueurs

Résumé

S'appuyant sur des modèles socio-psychologiques de la perception de soi, cet article explique l'identification des joueurs de jeux vidéo à un personnage ou à un rôle. En contraste avec les notions conventionnelles (« dyadiques ») des relations entre l'utilisateur et le personnage (p. ex. l'interaction parasociale ou la théorie des inclinations affectives), l'identification (« monadique ») aux jeux vidéo est définie comme un changement temporel de la perception de soi des joueurs à travers l'adoption de propriétés valorisées du personnage de jeu. Les conséquences pour l'appréciation du média, la mesure de l'identification et les effets médiatiques sont discutées.

Mots clés : identification, jeux vidéo, interactivité, soi, personnages médiatiques, réaction de l'auditoire, plaisir, transport, présence, interaction parasociale, autodivergence

## 视频游戏的“真正”认同：玩家自我意识的愉快转变理论

### 摘要

本文利用社会心理学的自我认知模式介绍视频游戏玩家与游戏角色的身份认同。本解释与传统的，二元的媒介使用者—角色（例如，仿社会互动或情感倾向理论）关系的观念不同，我们将单元的视频游戏身份认同定义为玩家对游戏角色价值特征的瞬时采纳。此外，本文还讨论了认同对媒体愉悦、身份认同的考量方法，以及瞬时媒介效应的含意。

The Video Game Experience as 'True' Identification: A Theory of  
Enjoyable Alterations of Players' Self-Perception

진짜 동질성으로서의 비디어 게임 경험: 게이머의 자기인지의 즐길만한 대안들에 관한  
이론

요약

본 논문은 자기확인의 사회적 심리적 모델들에 기초하는 게임 성격과 역할들과 동일시하는 비디어 게이머들의 설명을 소개한 것이다. 미디어 사용자의 통속적인 개념—성성격관계들—과 대비하여, 비디어 게임 동일시는 게임 성격들의 가치된 재산을 받아들이는 것으로서 게이머들의 자기인식을 임시적으로 변동하는 것으로 정의된다. 미디어 즐거움의 함의, 동일시의 측정, 그리고 미디어 효과들이 논의되었다.