

## Chapter 3

# The Relationship between Avatar–Based Customization, Player Identification, and Motivation

**Selen Turkay**  
*Harvard University, USA*

**Charles K. Kinzer**  
*Teachers College, Columbia University, USA*

### **ABSTRACT**

*Player identification is an outcome of gameplay experiences in virtual worlds and has been shown to affect enjoyment and reduce self-discrepancy. Avatar customization has potential to impact player identification by shaping the relationship between the player and the character. This mixed method study examines the effects of avatar-based customization on players' identification with their characters, and the effects of identification dimensions (i.e., perceived similarity, wishful identification, embodied presence) on their motivation in a massively multiplayer online game, Lord of the Rings Online (LotRO). Participants (N = 66) played LotRO either in customization or in no-customization group for ten hours in four sessions in a lab setting. Data were collected through interviews and surveys. Results showed both time and avatar customization positively impacted player identification with their characters. Player motivation was predicted in different sessions by different identification dimensions, which shows the dynamic and situational impact of identification on motivation.*

## INTRODUCTION

Media researchers have been writing about the ramifications of assuming technologically mediated identities since the inception of online virtual worlds (see Turkle, 1994; 1995). These virtual environments can provide anonymity and the freedom from the conventions of our everyday identities in areas such as gender, age or social status. They also offer opportunities to users to take on various personas, create or adopt new identities without fear of disapproval by members in their real-life social circle (Turkle, 1995).

There are different types of virtual worlds (i.e., social, gaming, educational) with various affordances. Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) have emerged to be one of the most popular gaming virtual worlds over the last decade, and have been studied from various perspectives (e.g., player demographics, addiction, socialization, player motivations). This popularity is partly because MMOs' affordances to allow players to temporarily become a game character and adopt the salient characteristics of that character (Looy, Courtois & de Vocht, 2010). As detailed in the following section, player identification with the avatar/character is central to how players experience the game (e.g., engagement and enjoyment; Klimmit, Hefner & Vorderer, 2009) and why they may continue to play the game (i.e., motivation). Determining aspects of games that influence and can improve players' identification with their characters would be of interest to game designers as well as educators who select games for their students.

Avatar customization is an understudied factor when it comes to identification. Yet, it allows making each character different in MMOs by providing various combinations of attributes, adornments/physical properties, skills, and traits (Dickey, 2007). Customization experiences may help players to get into the mindset of the character, immerse themselves in the game context, resulting in increased likelihood of affecting players' real self-identities. This paper examines players' identification with their characters over several gameplay sessions, varying the participants' ability to customize their characters, and poses the following main research question and two exploratory research questions:

**RQ<sub>1</sub>:** Is there a relationship between engagement with initial avatar customization and players' identification with their avatars?

**RQ<sub>2</sub>:** Does players' identification with their characters change over time?

**RQ<sub>3</sub>:** How does identification and customization predict players' motivation to play over time?

The background section below clarifies the theories and present previous studies that guided the formation of the research questions. Following the background, the methods section introduces the participants and describes the study. Before proceeding, however, it is worth clarifying the difference between avatar and character. Avatar is defined as the embodiment of the user in virtual environments (e.g., Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee, & Wadley, 2009). Characters in games are fictional identities within the narrative setting of the game. In this paper, "avatar" and "character" are used interchangeably because the research design does not differentiate avatar customization from character customization.

## BACKGROUND

In technologically mediated virtual environments, players establish digital identities using a combination of modalities including text, audio and visuals. These online identities in videogames and virtual worlds are important for self-exploration as well as to communicate with others and with the virtual

30 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage:

[www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-relationship-between-avatar-based-customization-player-identification-and-motivation/172360](http://www.igi-global.com/chapter/the-relationship-between-avatar-based-customization-player-identification-and-motivation/172360)

## Related Content

---

### Video Game Communication

(2015). *Integrating Video Game Research and Practice in Library and Information Science* (pp. 39-59).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/video-game-communication/125375](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/video-game-communication/125375)

### Gestural Articulations of Embodied Spatiality: What Gestures Reveal about Students' Sense-Making of Charged Particle Dynamics in a 3D Game World

Lai Har Judy Lee and Yam San Chee (2013). *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations* (pp. 17-47).

[www.irma-international.org/article/gestural-articulations-of-embodied-spatiality/102614](http://www.irma-international.org/article/gestural-articulations-of-embodied-spatiality/102614)

### Maintaining Balance and Wellness in Remote Work

Michelle Bartlett (2026). *Gaming, Wellness, and Technology in the Bold Global Workforce* (pp. 185-206).

[www.irma-international.org/chapter/maintaining-balance-and-wellness-in-remote-work/383900](http://www.irma-international.org/chapter/maintaining-balance-and-wellness-in-remote-work/383900)

### Collaboratories and Virtual Safaris as Research in Virtual Learning Environments Scholarship

Jonathon Richter (2011). *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations* (pp. 94-96).

[www.irma-international.org/article/collaboratories-virtual-safaris-research-virtual/53158](http://www.irma-international.org/article/collaboratories-virtual-safaris-research-virtual/53158)

### Creating Virtual Alter Egos or Superheroines? Gamers' Strategies of Avatar Creation in Terms of Gender and Sex

Sabine Trepte, Leonard Reinecke and Katharina-Maria Behr (2009). *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations* (pp. 52-76).

[www.irma-international.org/article/creating-virtual-alter-egos-superheroines/3955](http://www.irma-international.org/article/creating-virtual-alter-egos-superheroines/3955)