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ORDINARY MEN WITH EXTRA-ORDINARY SKILLS? MASCULINITY CONSTRUCTS AMONG MMORPG-GAMERS

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ABSTRACT. Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) involve long term intense social bonds between male players. Still, little is known about how masculinity constructs work as glue in these game communities. This study concerns masculine identities in applications (N=210) for community membership of a MMORPG community in Finland. Drawing on three identity dimensions (virtual, real, and projective) and three masculinity dimensions (heroic, ordinary, and revolting) the study shows that gamers emphasize real-world identity's ordinary and deviant masculinities, while heroic identity constructs are almost non-existing. Constructs of the virtual identity contained attributes and characteristics of the gamers' in-game skills. An ordinary masculine identity was emphasized in view of gamers' suitability as member of the clan and it was further underscored by "geek" and "nerd" characteristics. Being an outsider group (gamers), but still emphasizing the "ordinary" and being the "average guy," deviates from governing media images of gamers' communities as breeding grounds of isolation and aggression.

Keywords: MMORPGs; masculinity construct; identity; (extra-)ordinary; skill

1. Introduction

The media discussion surrounding digital gaming tends to be risk- and problem-oriented. For example, computer video gaming has been depicted as causing mental health problems (Ahlroth, 2014) and reducing social competence and cognition (Mykkänen, 2013). Such public concerns are often heavily gendered by emphasizing how young boys lose out due to their gaming habits.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are an easy target of public concern (see Karlsen, 2015). The gamers, who are mostly men, immerse themselves in the graphical virtual gaming environments about 20 to 25 hours a week (Griffiths et al., 2004; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Smahel et al., 2008), they appear exceptionally demarcated from the outside world. The fantasy and warfare milieus of the games are filled with tasks to be attended to through the coordination of the gamers' input. To advance and get the most out of the games, gamers form guilds that usually play together for several gaming sessions. In the public discourse, these online game communities are sometimes portrayed as breeding grounds for male aggression and lost souls (Walker, 2012; Karlsen, 2015). They have even been presented as a backdrop for the antagonized male offenders in school shootings (see Hoikkala & Suurpää, 2007). Still, not much is known about the masculinity constructs that are upheld through the collaboration and the "we"-spirit of these communities. Although research has covered a myriad of aspects of strong and intense social bonds between players (e.g. Verhagen & Johansson, 2009; Li & Alfano, 2006; Nardi & Harris, 2006; Hsu et al., 2009; Quandt & Kröger, 2013), less is known about how masculinity constructs work as social glue in these processes. There is, no doubt, a need to analyze the masculinity constructs that gamer communities are, in fact, nurturing.

In this study, we inquired into the masculine identities in applications (N=210) for community membership of one of the largest MMORPG gaming communities in Finland. The community has more than 2400 members, of whom less than 6% are women (2016). The study analyzes how the gamers present themselves as persons and as gamers, paying special attention to the nature and functions of their masculine identity. As both identity and masculinity positions are fluent concepts, we employ three gamers' identity positions (*virtual*, *real*, and *projective*, as suggested by Gee, 2003) and three masculinity positions (*heroic*, *ordinary*, and *revolting*, as suggested by Wetherell and Edley, 1999) for creating order and making sense of our observations.

We start by presenting some earlier research on MMORPG as well as our theoretical framework. Then, we report the results. In the end, we discuss our contribution, drawing up a grid that summarizes the masculine identities construed in the community under study.

2. Social and Gendered Worlds

MMORPG gamers typically create and sustain order within gaming guilds and clans by community rules. These rules have been shown to keep the group together and give it a cohesive identity (e.g. Johansson, 2013). Common MMORPG guild rules include being respectful to all participants, avoiding all kinds of discrimination, keeping drama to a minimum, avoiding foul language, and not taking in-game misfortunes too gravely (ibid.). Being a good ambassador for the group, being fair, following the rules, and committing to the group are other highlighted features (Johansson, 2013; similar findings by Foo & Koivisto, 2004).

The community of this study is glocal: it is based in Finland and its communication language is Finnish, but as MMORPGs are web-based and global to their character some English terminology is employed and participation is possible from any part of the world. The community's members refer to it as "The Clan." To join The Clan, gamers must accept the community rules (e.g. showing respect and avoiding foul language) and assure that they are more than 18 years of age. In addition, each applicant is obliged to fill out an anonymous membership application form in which they share certain basic information (age, sex, hours of gaming, etc.). In these applications, gamers are offered an opportunity to insert descriptions of themselves as persons and gamers. Although this part is optional, it tends to entail rather thick descriptions of the aspiring member as a potential co-gamer and friend. These descriptions constitute an interesting cultural material. The aspects accentuated and the discourse applied reveal certain characteristics of the gaming community culture and the social order within which it operates.

The analysis of this study concerns masculinity constructs embedded in the gaming community applications. As a cultural material, they do not only reflect the formal rules and standards for their communities, but certain practices, codes, and norms that are inherent in game designs and narrative as well as the communication and identity work typical for the gamer communities. Research shows that an important reason for gamers to invest their time and energy in the fantasy worlds is the conception of shared values in the group constellations of the guilds and the clans (Park & Chung, 2011). The games offer ways of experiencing togetherness through coordinated goal-oriented action by means of co-experienced and jointly construed narratives. Thus far, the growing literature on self-constructs and social bonds in MMORPGs has mainly concerned avatar building and internal game communication (see, e.g., Eklund & Johansson, 2013). We have not been able to find any research that investigates the expression and negotiation of masculine identities in the presentation of MMORPG gamers' "selves" to their future game community peers.

When it comes to the subject of MMORPG and doing gender, it has been studied through the gendered content of avatars, roles, and characters of the games (Albrechtslund, 2007; Eklund, 2011), in studies on in-game gender swapping (Hussain & Griffiths, 2009; Lou et al., 2013; Paik & Shi, 2013; Martey et al., 2014), and in endeavors concerned with the gender-related motivations to play (Yee, 2006). Taylor (2006) has argued that the nature of identity work in MMORPG – with play designs that are the same for women and men – makes the games potentially a radical framework for challenging stereotypical forms of femininity (ibid., 97). Male and female gamers are basically believed to act in the game world on equal terms, with equal opportunities to express what they want about personal gender adherence. Still, in some games, some classes of avatars are race and gender locked, and recently, the multiplayer game Rust has, for example, started the praxis of assigning gender roles randomly (Webstar, 2016).

The meaning-making of online role gamers' identities is known to be layered and multi-positioned. To be sensitive to this circumstance in our analysis, we draw on two theoretical frameworks. The first stems from Gee's work on video games' values, identity, and embodiment (Gee, 2003; 2007; 2008). According to Gee (2003), the selves and identities of video role gamers (such as MMORPG gamers) involve a virtual identity, a real-world identity, and a projective identity. By identity, he refers to the ability to be recognized as a "kind of person" within a given context. From this perspective, individuals have multiple identities that are connected not to some fixed, internal state of being but to flexible patterns of participation in social events.

The virtual identity is one's identity as a virtual character in the virtual world. The real-world identity refers to the gamer's own identity as a person playing the game. The projective identity is the hardest to grasp, but basically it refers to the concept of "project" in its two significations: the projection of the gamer's values and desires onto the virtual character and thus the virtual character as one's project in the making, creating a certain trajectory through time, defined by aspirations. According to Gee (2003), the projective identity is the most important one for understanding the power of the game (54–55). In the applications the gamers present identities along all of these three dimensions. The projective identities can, in a wider interpretation, be discerned in expectations of what the gaming and the social interaction is going to be like in the community: a project that the gamer envisions (and hopes for) in the future. It indicates projecting values and desires onto the character of the community and seeing the gaming as one's own project in the making (see Gee, 2007).

To grasp the logic whereby masculinity constructs permeate identity constructs in the applications, we employed the three imaginary masculinity positions by Wetherell and Edley (1999): *heroic*, *ordinary*, and *revolting*,

which are commonly used in masculinity discourse analysis and image studies. Subjects who take the heroic position typically align themselves strongly with conventional ideals of men, such as being courageous, physically tough, and able to keep calm and cool. In the ordinary position, the self is described as normal, moderate, or average. Rebellious positions, then, look, at least superficially, like the resistance to hegemonic masculinity. Here, subjects ignore or revolt against what is socially expected; they define themselves as unconventional and their positions involve a flouting of social expectations. We analyzed our material by discerning the main meaning-making traits in the descriptions under study. After these traits were identified, they were positioned in relation to the three masculinity constructs and the three game identities. It is important for the reader to keep in mind that identity categories and masculinity categories overlap. Nevertheless, their separation was important for our analytical objectives.

3. Materials and Methods

We randomly selected 70 applications for each of the three most popular games: World of Warcraft (WoW), EVE, and World of Tanks (WoT), giving a total of 210 applications. The applicants reported the places of residence in different parts of Finland and an age range between 18 and 52 years (mean age of 30 years; the majority in the age range of 21–35 years). Of the 210 applicants, one-third were students, one fourth had a lower-level job (vocational school background), and 13% reported a more academically demanding job (college degree). The rest were out of work, on sick leave, or declared no information.

The application form contains fields for information on background, hobbies, family, personality, game career, etc., but the only compulsory items to fill out are age and acceptance of the community's rules. Although the amount of items may sound unnecessary detailed, this information may potentially be of great interest for the community, as the gamers spend an enormous amount of time together cooperating in sometimes difficult game tasks in different group constellations.

According to the administrator, the application procedure has been put in place to ensure that the community consists of "nice persons" and that members can find "like-minded company". After the applications are posted, the members of the community can post their views on the applications in a comments field. Still, the administrator's approval of the new applicants seems more or less like a formality.

The permission to use the applications as a material for the present study was sought from the site administrator of the community. Furthermore, an announcement was posted on the forum so that all members would have a

chance to react to or oppose the use of the material. Although the applications are anonymous to begin with, all information that could potentially reveal the applicants' identity (place of birth, age, and hometown) was excluded already in the stage of data collection.[1]

In the analysis, we proceeded by reading and rereading the material to find patterns in the constructs and presentations of self. All self-descriptions were marked and coded in the Atlas.ti qualitative software coding program as semantic units. Based on the most common meaning-making logic materialized from the material, all semantic units that referenced to masculinity or the male gender were further categorized into three subgroups: (i) expressing desire to be part of the community, (ii) descriptions of being an ordinary Finnish bloke, and (iii) skills and lack of skills. It is important to point out that gender is a conceptual category that permeates almost all speech, and in the material, there were many accounts that were gendered but still not directly referring to anything related to biological sex or being a man. The references to the community were often gendered in subtle ways, involving presuppositions of a "crowd [of men]," a "bunch of serious [male] gamers." The reliability of the coding was trialed between the two researchers of the study. In this process, different arguments of the ways in which the semantic units could be seen as gendered were spelled out and assessed critically. In the next section, we account for what the three subgroups contained and discuss how they entail masculinity positions and gamer identities.

4. Analysis

Online self-presentation has shown to be a format that encourages the intimate revelations of self and formulations of more deep-seated feelings and thoughts than those made without the intermediation of screens and pseudonyms (see also Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Suler, 2004; Henderson & Gilding, 2004; Valkenburg et al., 2005). Furthermore, MMORPGs are known to herald "a norm of authenticity in players' personal narratives unless explicitly stated otherwise" (Valkyrie, 2011: 78). This is also demonstrated in a study by Cole and Griffiths (2007), in which a large amount of MMORPG gamers would report that they discuss sensitive issues with online friends who they would never talk about with their outside-game friends. Our very first overall observation was that this seemed to be also the case in the studied community. The applicants seemed honest and open and shared private things about themselves, such as being shy and withdrawn, or failures in different areas of everyday life. Overall, one can say that the applications emphasized things that are not easily ordered in the category of heroic masculinity.

Desire to be part of the community

The first category conceptualizations in which the gamers expressed masculine identities concerned the reasons for wanting to join the community. In this code, the applicants expressed the desire to be part of a social context and they contain expectations on the added value of the membership. We see this content as mostly part of a projective identity construct, as it entails expectations on the gaming community working together, as a project that the applicant will be part of in the future. Furthermore, and in line with Gee (2003), this category entails hopes and expectations that the applicants are projecting onto the gamer community.

The most common reasons given for applying to the community had to do with the social aspects of gaming: cooperation with other gamers, socializing, getting friends, and hanging out online. The socializing by the gamers is expressed as taking place in an assumed all-male community ("with like-minded guys"), but there were also other shared characteristics that were assumed to make the interaction and cooperation enjoyable.

The age limit of 18 years seemed to contribute to the expectations of a more grown-up and mature style of conversation: "A guild for grown-up Finnish men sounds just like what I've been looking for. Playing EVE on my own is OK, but in a proper bunch it could be even more fun" (EVE, 29).[2] "Adult conversations without any annoying teenage whingers" (EVE, 20). "[I expect] a more mature crowd and some easy-going vibes" (WoW, 39). "It's R-18 and I've heard you really do your stuff seriously but in a relaxed style" (EVE, 29). The grown-up man is portrayed as more calm and mature in view of game tasks and in the overall perspective on his own whereabouts: "I'd really like to find a place where I can play in good adult company in line with my own possibilities and time schedule. A good atmosphere, good jokes, and cooperation – this is what I miss and what makes me happy and activates me as a player" (EVE, 33).

The applicants express hopes of finding a group of [male] gamers that they can fit into, with whom they can identify and experience meaningful interaction. The community seems to have a well-known reputation of being fair, true, and reliable. The applicants say they have heard that the community is convivial, relaxed, and fun to hang around. They express hopes of finding players on "the same laid-back wavelength." These utterances express an appreciation of a moderate and uncomplicated male togetherness in line with the ordinary masculinity position. The applicants convey high expectations of nice, relaxed, and fun times among peers of men. Many even express hopes that they can stay in the guild for a long time, so that they can make long-lasting friendships.

Also, a heroic masculinity position of the community is expressed. The community is known to attract skillful gamers: "I've heard it's a tough clan, with a cool atmosphere" (WoT, 23). "Seems like a geezers' crowd. [A crowd that] plays for real but not too seriously" (WoT, 50). "I" is presenting himself as a suitable candidate for the in-group. "I" seeks "new acquaintances" (WoW, 30); "good guys" and "nice moments" (EVE, 23); "funny gabbing, just joking/p*ssing off each other" (WoW, 21); "My aim is to find a good crowd with whom I can learn new stuff and have fun" (EVE, 27). The constructs of the community as a forthcoming context to be part of is thus acknowledged simultaneously in terms of a relaxed ordinary masculine position and a heroic coolness and maturity created by its skillful adult male players.

The community's "brand" and constitution seems to fit well with certain established criteria for high levels of group unity: the image and reputation of the group are favorable, interactivity within the group is positive, and homogeneity seems high (see Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Bhattacharya et al., 1995). The typical assumed gamer company expressed in the applications is by a like-minded male gamer who speaks the same language, is a mature adult, and is known to be serious about their hobby.

A common Finnish bloke

In the applications, the images that the applicants build of themselves as persons are highly gendered. Although these constructs mainly draw on a real-world identity, they will naturally be based on the kind of characteristics the gamers expect to be attractive and useful for the community and its activities. This is likely to be drawn on their cultural knowledge of MMORPG gaming and on their experience of similar social interaction.

Some of the likable personal characteristics especially emphasized are expressed within an ordinary masculinity position. Being humble, uncomplicated, easy-going, and calm are attributes associated to the male gender of the applicants. The characteristic of easy-goingness is expressed by references to "being an ordinary bloke" and "nothing special." The tone of the application texts is joking, explicitly relaxed, and humorous. The humor is typically Finnish "matter-of-fact" and self-distanced at times: "I am a basic angry Finnish man who drinks beer, games on the computer, and goes to work. I am going to give vocational school a shot in the autumn and find out whether that could be the 'thing' for a bloke like myself. Basically, [I am] a relaxed bloke who has no problems getting along with everybody. I live in [name of town] in a suicide cell [=bedsit]. Nothing else. Thank you" (WoT, 22).

The cultural content and the applied short tone above serve as a pastiche of a Finnish man, known to be less talkative and mostly listener-centered in his interpersonal relationships, weighing up his words and speaking truthfully (Carbaugh, 2009; Wilkins & Isotalus, 2009). Being "a normal Finnish bloke" and not sticking out in any way is what makes you someone who people can "count in" and "count on": "I'm a basic yokel", "I'm your usual Finn, pretty flat" (WoT, 43). These accounts are oriented towards being someone who is not sticking out, causing disturbance, taking space, or demanding attention.

A dimension that can be seen as associated with the gamers' virtual identity and ways of fitting in their roles in the game concerns the emphasis on being someone who one can count on. Basically, the signs used for being of male gender and from Finland already connote this feature in the application texts. The most common way of presenting oneself as a reliable person/ co-gamer is to describe oneself as "being a good and nice Finnish person": "I am just an ordinary young guy who has gotten hooked on computer games" (WoW, 23). "I am your basic bloke whose activity in the game varies a lot…/…/My life rhythm is dictated by my live-in girlfriend baby/dog/work, and ongoing reparations of an owner-occupied house…/…/I think a lot about things, but [when needed] I can make decisions in a split second" (WoT, 29). Being a Finn of the male gender connotes being nice and uncomplicated as a "real person" but therefore also reliable as a gamer.

The emotional control over character in terms of coolness and emotional control can be seen as part of a traditional heroic masculinity. Still, it seems important not to be someone who crosses the line to taking the gaming "too" seriously, displaying anger or disappointment when the gaming is not proceeding to full satisfactory. Authenticity, shyness, and quietness may be resources in MMORPGs, where cooperation sometimes require a low profile and giving space to others. Still, the comment above about being able to make decisions in a split second could be seen as a typical heroic masculinity construct. The "ordinary" of the real-world identity seems to serve purposes of being a likable person, whereas the same trait of the virtual self needs to be supplemented with comments about skills that are out of the ordinary (being fast, cool, rational).

There seems to be a non-written rule that there should never be any bragging about real-life personal features. Rather, an ironic account of a loser or semi-loser existence seems to be a prevailing grasp of a revolting masculine identity. The applicants diminish and belittle themselves, leaving out mentions of any qualifications and success in life outside the gaming world. "Being ordinary" connotes not only trust, commitment, cooperativeness, and being same-minded with others in the community, but it is also in line with the scholarly literature on nerd culture as a sub-culture that appreciates biographical trajectories that do not appear very aggressive or self-

emphasizing (Woo, 2012). In fact, being ordinary and leaving our status hierarchies of the outside world can be claimed as the most common tactic to gain entrance into this specific community. It seems to serve this sub-cultural field; it may make it easier to relate to one another, speak, get along, and exchange ideas (see also Williams et al., 2014).

When it comes to the applications' real-world identity constructs, a re-volting masculinity position is obvious in mentioning a lack of other leisure interests: "Well, I don't have that many hobbies other than sitting in front of my laptop and sipping beer. Sure, sometimes I need to see friends as well. And I need to fix my Opel as it always likes to act up…" (EVE, 23). There is only one mention of a car brand (the Opel in the citation above) and even then the car is used as a sign of "losership". There are no mentionings of leisure activities that could be considered typically masculine (e.g. gym, cars) or sophisticated (e.g. tennis, golf, art, and fine dining). The same goes for career progress or anything that refers to monetary value. Home districts are only mentioned if they serve the game itself, as in the following comment by a WoW gamer (39): "I live in the eastern part of Helsinki, which means I'm familiar with real-life dps (damage per second)". The joking message is that this applicant lives in a lower socioeconomic area with a rough reputation that might be of use in the gaming.

The humble and uncomplicated real-world profile is emphasized among all applicants: "I don't drone on about things unnecessarily" (EVE, 32); "I'm a calm and diplomatic person who rarely speaks, and even when I'm drunk, I know how to behave" (WoT, 34); "I'm a cheerful guy, easy to get along with. In the game, I'm a reliable gamer who listens to others and understands the meaning of group work" (WoT, 31); "I am an easy-going guy who is not always speaking and who probably speaks too much when there's an open invitation to speak" (EVE, 28); "I'm an honest man and a bit shy. I like to be part of a group and get to know others" (EVE, 27); "Calm, uncomplicated, rather quiet" (WoT, 40).

One could imagine that normative low-profile statements would need to be balanced by a distinction to different sorts of otherness/strangeness or just offset by emphasizing some sort of superiority. This is, however, hard to spot in the material, as all inflammable questions are carefully avoided: there are no references to religion, politics, love life relationships, or even popular sports teams. Applicants probably want to avoid controversy and so be agreeable in the eyes of others, but for us a more convincing explanation is that the constructs of being an ordinary "Finnish bloke" and the absence of references to status, high education, and money are all important building blocks of the strong projective "gamer group identity" that unites the members of the community. The result is an open-minded, non-judgmental construction of group unity. Being a man, a gamer, and a Finn is not expressed through a

rejection of non-male, non-gamer, or non-Finns. These categories are not mentioned. The concepts of "commonness" and "friendliness" seem to contribute to a sense of belonging by a same-minded group of persons. The projective image of an uncomplicated friendly community entails no drama. One could assume that this serves the gaming: it is easier to arrange cooperation with a crowd that is relaxed and positive and do not reflect too much on internal differences and real-life status.

Skills and lack of skills

The ways in which the community distinct their sub-cultural identity from the rest of society is articulated in standpoints that reflect common prioritizations and taste. As already shown, the applicants show great skills of self-reflexivity through their ironic self-distancing. Gamers describe their sense of humor as "grim" and say they can overcome their shyness with the help of "a couple of beers". The gamers characterize themselves as geeks and outsiders in a reflective and humoristic way. Mostly, the lack of skills is expressed in a revolting real-life position, whereas the rare mentions of actual skills are expressed in passing and in view of a virtual and projective identity.

The revolting imaginary masculinity position is especially apparent when the topic of sports comes up. Basically, boasting about sports performances or even mentioning them is not a legitimate discursive trait in this community. Some mention that they are regular joggers or have some sort of ball sport as a hobby. However, the most typical way of describing one's own sports performances is to stress how bad one is at sports: "I try to get through the gym program without getting too much muscle pains" (EVE, 27). It is acceptable and expected to talk about sport-related failures, and it is also expected that others in the community have the same low level of interest in sports: "Music saved me from sport" (EVE, 32); "I try to keep up my social relations as much as I reasonably can (provided they don't interfere with my gaming?), and I am currently working out with only low weights ☺" (WoT, 33); "I've been playing [computer games] since I was little. At some point I tried to go out for a jog" (WoT, 23); "I've gymmed a bit, so a very small man -> small man. I am quite skillful with computers" (EVE, 33). These humoristic references to a uniting nerd culture channel a projective group identity of otherness. It can be understood as connoting "we are outsiders in view of societal norms". This is an interesting position, not the least as it seems to be rather heavily gendered.

Again, the above is in line with some sub-cultural characteristics of nerd culture (Woo, 2012); the lack of interest for sports stands in contrast to certain types of masculinity embodiment (see, e.g., Aronowitz, 1992: 58; Wienke, 1998; Gill et al., 2005). Sport activities are known to be social

realms in which men need to partake to keep up the power advantage of patriarchy (Tiihonen, 1999: 89). A "masculine identity validation" is accomplished through the use of the body as an instrument of power, dominance, and control. Especially for males who have less access to abstract forms of masculinity-validating power (economic power, workplace authority), the physical body and its potential for violence have been shown to provide concrete means of achieving and asserting superiority (e.g. Katz, 2002), muscles being an important marker that separate men from one another and from women (Klein, 1993). The downplaying or ignorance of physical performance does not only seem to be a natural result of this being a male community and markers to the female gender thus not being relevant, but also the gaming logic as well as the computer hobby are presented as realms that deviate from traditional masculine hobbies. The MMORPG games demand abstract and intellectual resources typically involving skills to communicate and reflect on situations: gamers need to handle advanced cooperation situations and move between multiple self-positions (real life, avatar, projective).

The revolting position of the "nerd" serves as a contrast to sporting males and is expected to gain resonance in the community: "I am a quiet nerd. My life's mission is to stay put in front of the PC. At the moment I'm working as an electronics installer. Among my hobbies I can mention reading (war, sci-fi, fantasy), listening to heavy metal music, and drinking beer" (EVE, 32). Emphasizing the simplicity of one's life serves the projective identity of the community. It communicates that the gamer is a good fit for the "we" of the gamers' community.

5. Summary of Results

This study has pointed out a rather complex assembly of overlapping identities and masculinity constructs in the applications to the MMORPG-clan under study. The different identities and masculinities seem to support each other and serve different purposes. Our main observations are gathered in Table 1. From the table, it stands clear that the emphasis of the applications is put on the real-world identity's ordinary and revolting masculinities, whereas the only heroic real-world identity construct that we could find was the one of being able to behave even when drunk. The masculinity constructs of the virtual identity contained mostly different attributes and characteristics of the gamers' in-game skills. The semantic units that expressed a projective identity would typically concern expectations of the clan and how well the gamer would fit into this clan as a future project. Whereas the ordinary traits were emphasized in view of their fit in the clan, the "geek" and "nerd"

characteristics were employed in view of the surrounding world and its gendered norms.

Table 1 Masculine identities as expressed in the applications. Emphasis is put on the real-life ordinary and revolting. These serve the virtual and project identities in different ways.

VIRTUAL	REAL	PROJECTIVE
HEROIC	HEROIC	HEROIC
* Calm	* Even when drunk, knows	* Reputation of clan: tough,
* Making decisions in a	how to behave (one citation)	cool atmosphere
split of a second	ORDINARY	* Playing for real
* Control of emotions	* Fun to hang out with	ORDINARY
ORDINARY	* Identification, sameness	* Identification, sameness
* Low profile	* Shyness, quietness	* Quality of game
* Reliable	* Uncomplicated	* Laid back
* Someone to count	* Easy-going, calm	REVOLTING
in/count on	* Nothing special, ordinary	* Geeks
* Listener	* Usual Finnish bloke	* Real-life cred (part of town
* Understands group	* Nice and uncomplicated	where gamer live)
dynamics	REVOLTING	
REVOLTING	* Shyness, quietness	
* Shyness	* Humble "looser"	
* Quietness	* No hobbies (except for	
	gaming)	
	* No sports, no muscles	
	* Honest	
	* Shy	
	* Geek	

6. Conclusions

The analysis shows that the studied MMORPG community is upheld through identity positions with specific gendered expectations and self-descriptions pertaining to the person and gamer. These were positioned in view of the three imaginary masculinity constructs of the heroic, the ordinary, and the revolting (Wetherell & Edley, 1999) and in view of real-world, virtual, and projective identities (Gee, 2003).

The projective identity of the clan contains hegemonic masculinity constructs of the community's gamers being tough, cool, and serious, keeping their temper, and being mature and adult. The applying gamer, on his part, is articulated in the imaginary position of the ordinary or the revolting. He is a Finnish man with a down-to-earth, quiet, and shy personality – a person who is calm and laid-back. Thus, even if constructs of a "real self" are mostly the ones of the common bloke who is shy and uncomplicated, the gaming self is more heroic: he is able to maintain his temper, control emotions, and make decisions in a split of a second. The enhanced favorable heroic characteristics,

including being a Finnish man, seem to work inwards towards a strong group identity of gamers.

The projective collective identity encompasses a group of geeks outside common status connotations and competitions of society. This seems, on its part, to be working both to emphasize a group identity and to distinguish the gamers from the surrounding world of non-gamers.

A likely reason for real-life status signs being excluded in the application is that MMORPGs are explicitly about living an identity, a role, and an avatar. In gaming realms, the real-life identity and personality uniqueness has no supportive function (see Williams et al., 2014) as in-game accomplishments tend to speak for themselves, and it may be wise and beneficial to downplay accomplishments by showing modesty. Although we are aware that a slight underplay of accomplishments is a common technique for creating amiability (Schlenker & Leary, 1982), we still see this humble, uncomplicated, and ordinary position of the self and community as unique for the gamers as a group of men.

The ambivalence of being an outsider group (gamers), but still emphasizing the "ordinary" and being the "normal Finnish man", seems to actively work against a positioning of the self in relation to others through opposing and negative definitions and markers. In its complexity, this positioning deviates from the popular media image of male gamers' communities. A closer examination of the in-game interaction underpinning this stance would be an important focus for future research.

NOTES

1. Each anonymized application received a number code when collected, so that we could trace the content to the collected anonymized application. In addition, as the 210 applications were gathered from a total of more than 1440 applications, it should be impossible to identify the information given in the article to a specific application (see King, 1996; Eysenbach and Till, 2001, for ethical issues considered).

2. The name of the game to which the application applies and the age of the applicant are given in parentheses. For reasons of readability, we have omitted these parentheses when the citation is less than three words long.

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