Player Persona Research

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INTRODUCTION

We live in the age of personalized services. In order to create personalized services, one must first understand how customers are both similar and different from each other. Furthermore, these similarities and differences must be communicated in a comprehensible way. In this latter task, "persona" has emerged as an important tool. In market research, personas are described as fictive yet concrete representations of specific target groups, identified based on common and shared behavioral characteristics (Pruitt & Adlin 2006; Miaskiewicz & Kozar 2011).

However, "persona" was not first introduced as a market research concept but instead as an anthropological and psychological one. Indeed, it has been adopted by many renowned authors including Goffman, Jung, Butler, and Foucault. The objective of this study is to discuss the differences between these two understandings of "persona" in the case of player research. As a result, it will be proposed that a synthesis between these two understandings is both possible and desirable.

THE CONCEPT OF PERSONA

The term persona comes from Latin and ancient Greek in which it designated a mask that was worn in acts and performances. Persona was a temporary, situated and activity-bound public identity a person adopted for a specific purpose. Later, persona came to signify public identities such as one's identity as a politician or as a musician. (Tonkin 1992, 225–232) In terms of origins, persona thus implies presentation of the self which establishes a discontinuity between private self and contextual self.

In the Jungian research tradition, persona is how an individual appears to herself and to the world, that is, "a function of relationship" (Jung 1946, 209) between the subject and her social and cultural environment (Casement 2014; see Jung 1928, 164–165). For Goffman, persona meant everyday performance of the self in social contexts (Barbour et al. 2014). In contemporary social science research persona refers more narrowly to conscious and intentional construction of the self (i.e. self-performance) in user-generated *presentational media* such as social media, celebrity culture, virtual worlds and online game environments. (Barbour & Marshall 2012; Marshall 2014)

PLAYER PERSONA

In a classical study on construction of social self, G. H. Mead (2015 [1934], 144–164) argued that in play an individual plays *at* something, that is, at a social role of the

other. However, in games "playing at something" is not sufficient. Instead, a person must play *as being* something else by reconsidering herself as a social position within the game.

Playing by being as something else than one otherwise is establishes a discrepancy between a person and her player position. This condition has been widely discussed in game studies literature. For instance Vygotsky (1967[1933]) wrote famously on dual-position of the player being both outside and inside play simultaneously, Goffman on frames and role-taking activity (1986[1974]; see Bateson 2000[1955]), Abrahams (2005, 109; 1982) on players' practice to try-on different selves in rule systems, and Fine (2000[1983]) on transformations in player's position. Eugen Fink (1968; 2016[1960] 156–158) furthermore argued that a person "does not play with the mask, one plays in the mask" and by doing so, she gains extraordinary powers and abilities, an access to alternative system of meaning (Fink 2016[1975]).

Player persona thus stands for the player position as a first-person vantage point through which an individual experiences and presents herself in gameplay. Player persona is *not* to be reduced to taking on a viewpoint of an in-game character. As a concept, it describes a more general and invariant alteration in person's subjectivity as she begins to play a game. This change is evident in players' usage of the first-person singular pronoun: "I died", "I attack you" and so on. (Vahlo 2018; see. Linderoth 2004; Linderoth 2005) Player persona is the identity of I-as-a-player, it is how we constitute and organize ourselves in gaming activities (cf. Korsgaard 2011; Noë 2105). Indeed, "we cannot play if we are not conscious of playing" (Arsenault & Perron 2009, 111).

PLAYER PERSONA RESEARCH

In human-computer interaction (HCI) studies, player personas are usually conceptualized similarly to market research traditions. Persona is understood as a tool for modeling patterns of behaviors of individual players into aggregates such as player types: "Each persona represents a significant portion of people in the real world and enables the designer to focus on a manageable and memorable cast of characters, instead of focusing on thousands of individuals" (Canossa & Drachen 2009; see Vahlo et al. 2018).

Both of the HCI approach and the social science based understanding on "persona" acknowledge that there is a discontinuity between being a person and being a player: phenomenological analyses on the gameplay experience may argue that an individual is not responsible for what happens in a game as a person but precisely as a player; HCI studies aim to reveal factors and patterns in player traits but are cautious in making general claims about personality. Bringing these two frameworks together could open up perspectives on making sense on how adopting the player position changes our self-experience, how statistically generated player types correlate to players' self-experiences, and on how we express ourselves and our values in patterns of our gaming behavior.

I propose that these two seemingly distant understandings of player persona can be brought together. This task requires both interdisciplinary research attitude and mixed-method approach. Interdisciplinary research attitude is needed for discussing how the two understandings are related on a theoretical level, how individuals perceive themselves as player persona i.e. "I-as-a-player", and how their player persona relates to their personality traits. Mixed-method approach is needed, because results from statistical analyses of telemetric data and survey data should be triangulated with qualitative interview data to better understand the player persona phenomenon.

The utmost purpose of interdisciplinary and mixed-method research on player personas is to help us to grasp how being a player changes our self-experience *and* to identify recurrent patterns in this change by analyzing e.g. player behavior, preferences, and motivations to play across cultures. This research agenda would enable game scholars to discuss player persona traits similarly, yet distinctively, than personality traits are discussed in psychological literature.

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