INTRODUCTION

It has become almost a cliché to say that Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) are laboratories in which individuals experiment with their identities. Like most clichés, it happens to be true. Since Sherry Turkle’s (1995) seminal work on identity construction in Multi User Dungeons (MUDs), there has been a huge amount of research exploring and documenting a wide range of motivations, behaviors, and consequences associated to players’ identity construction and presentation in online games. To be sure, different theoretical and methodological approaches have been implemented, which testifies for the increasing interest of scholars from
different quarters in understanding how personal and social identity is created, assumed, and negotiated in online games. But all share the common assumption that in-game identity construction involves complex articulations of players’ personal and social backgrounds with affordances of embodiment and communication provided by specific online game technologies.

Constructing one’s self-story through avatars or characters in World of Warcraft (henceforth WoW) typically involves adopting the plot and mythology provided by game designers but also adapting the play and narrative culture within which one grows up to WoW’s gameplay affordances, although this may not be recognized as such by most players. Through this double process of adoption and adaptation, players juggle multiple roles, try on different hats, different lives, forging relevant selves that can either be relatively permanent or dissolved into new combinations when new game challenges arise. In a persistent fantasy world that demands flexibility in self-presentation and role-playing, identity construction may be conceived as an adaptive process governed by a confederacy of multiple self-conceptions. It is within this flexible and at the same time intricate context that we want to examine how French-speaking players construct their personal and collective identities via their digital counterparts or avatars.

Our aim in this chapter is to put forward a view identity construction in WoW as a socially embedded, situated personal narrative susceptible of being analyzed via players’ discourses. We will argue that examining players’ identity discourse provides insight into how they concretize perceptions of the ludic structure of the game, reconstruct their biographies as players, impute group identities, and align personal and collective identities. By drawing on Van Dijk’s (2001) approach to Critical Discourse Analysis, we will examine sixteen online semi-structured interviews of WoW players to understand how players’ self-presentation is narratively managed when introducing their avatars, what are parts of them that live in their avatars, and how they perceive and/or construct collective identity within guilds.

The structure of the chapter is as follows. We will start by briefly summarizing recent research focused on identity issues in WoW. After this brief summary, we will introduce the theoretical and methodological background for Critical Discourse Analysis in WoW and present the study results. Finally, we will provide some directions for future research and highlight some conclusions drawn from the present research.

**BACKGROUND**

Recent research on identity construction and presentation in WoW has showed that the ways in which players digitally (re)present themselves via avatars or characters reveal core assumptions about their actual and idealized self-conceptions. In order to understand the effects of these assumptions on players’ avatar construction and game-based socialization, some researchers have examined how players create and negotiate their personal and social identity online by focusing on the role played by physical and personality traits (Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore, 2006; Besèière, Seay & Kiesler, 2007) as well as cultural and organizational models (Bainbridge, 2010a).

Research done by Ducheneaut, Yee, Nickell, & Moore (2006) examined avatar personalization in three online worlds: Maple Story, Second Life, and WoW by focusing on two issues (1) evaluating current avatar creation and customization systems, and (2) examining the link between avatar system’s features, the eventual avatars created by users, and users’ physical and psychological characteristics. As far as identity-related issues in WoW are concerned, the study revealed that most players own multiple characters, which testifies for players need for a flexible appearance. Most WoW players granted relative importance to character features such as hair style, facial characteristics, and hair color but not to character skin color. Furthermore,