No Pain, No Game: use of an online game to explore issues of online identity and the implications for collaborative e-learning

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ABSTRACT As computer-mediated communication (CMC) is becoming more mainstream in higher education (HE), the issue of social interaction online and its impact on learning has been raised. CMC theorists have argued that shared group identity produces the online social presence necessary for successful interaction but that other identities may be inhibiting. Meanwhile, advocates of the liberating potential of online communication have drawn on postmodern interpretations of identity to argue that the online world offers freedom from the constraints of social identities such as gender and class, but critics argue that social behaviours and stereotypes are not transcended but are reproduced through language and style. Salmon’s five-step model promotes social interaction as a basis for collaborative e-learning, but it does not encourage such a critical exploration of online identity. To address these issues, this article explores the development and use of an online identity creation game to examine how participants respond to making online identity more visible, and to review the implications for e-learning. Discourse analysis was used to study the game from a researcher-participant perspective. Nearly all players pursued a low-risk strategy of concentrating on their own identity rather than on those of peers and were anxious about applying social conventions online. While many understood how online identity is constructed through descriptive text, only a minority was aware that style and language can also create identity, thus exhibiting what we term online ‘listening’ skills. The game made transparent some of the difficulties in developing the online presence required for collaborative e-learning and suggests a more general need for learners to acquire familiarity with the processes of online identity construction.

Introduction

With the widespread introduction of e-learning in higher education (HE), opportunities for challenging conventional didactic teaching have grown. There have been innovations in the use of collaborative, sometimes termed co-operative, learning (McConnell, 2000; Salmon, 2000), multimedia, simulations and modelling (Laurillard, 2002) and, more recently, online dialogue games (Ravenscroft, 2005). Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is rapidly becoming part of the mainstream of learning in HE and the associated online skills are starting to be recognised and discussed (Hughes, 2005). The need to blend social with academic interaction online is widely acknowledged and Salmon’s (2000, 2002) five-step model for induction into the use of online group discussion has incorporated a socialisation stage. However, while Turkle (1995) argues that those who pursue leisure ‘chat’ and other Internet activities may be familiar with the mechanisms for constructing online ‘selves’, not all learners will have this understanding of how identity can be constructed through text and they may not appreciate how conventional emotions and power relations of, for example, gender or class, are reproduced online. In exploring online identity and its
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significance for those engaging in e-learning, this article takes Salmon’s approach to socialisation online a step further by examining an online discursive game developed during collaboration between Imperial College London and the University of East London (UEL).

Although the value of ‘edutainment’ has been hotly debated, particularly in the context of lifelong learning and widening participation (Usher & Edwards, 1994), games are not conventionally associated with HE. A game is defined by Chambers Dictionary as ‘a competitive amusement according to a system of rules’ (1988). Ironically, formal education has long been associated with rules and a sense of competition, and it is the more light-hearted approach implied by the term ‘game’ which causes concerns about the use of game playing as an educational activity. Nevertheless, we proposed that engaging in an online identity game could be both motivating and challenging for adult learners, such as those undergoing professional development in teaching or learning support in HE.

In the first section we explore why a constructivist perspective on identity is useful. CMC theorists have argued that a shared group identity generates the social presence necessary for successful online interaction, but that other social identities, such as gender or job status, may interfere with these processes. Visual cues may be absent, but hierarchies and emotional responses are still conveyed through use of language. Salmon (2000) and others have argued that any discomfort associated with the social and emotional side of online communication is likely to lead to superficial engagement or even non-participation in groups or conferences, and this is what is frequently reported in practice. But her solution of training ‘e-moderators’ to manage online discourse may not empower learners. We further argue that participants in CMC need to be skilled in online ‘listening’ as well as presenting their own ideas so that they can take risks and challenge each other’s views, and also be aware of social behaviours and inequalities online.

We then apply this theory to the game design. Participants from two collaborating institutions were instructed to maintain a partly fictitious online identity, answering questions judiciously while exploring the identity construction of others. After a week, players were invited to guess the ‘true’ identity of others in the group and to reveal their own deliberate fabrications. Players were also invited to reflect on the experience.

In the next section we briefly explain our methodology for studying the game – what it can tell us about online interaction to promote learning and its success in increasing participants’ understanding of online identity building. The authors both took part in the game on the same footing as the students and acted as participant researchers. To understand how the game was played, and what the players experienced, we used a macro-level analysis of the exchanges and the reflections in the first instance, but also applied other forms of discourse analysis where appropriate to gain a deeper understanding of how players interacted and the wider implications of their behaviour for collaborative online learning.

Results indicated that the game was enjoyable but at times unsettling, leading to players adopting low-risk strategies. The analysis showed that participants brought with them very limited concepts of identity, whether off- or online. In this unfamiliar virtual world they were likely to draw on stereotypes and exercise caution about upsetting others but were unlikely to question each other in depth or challenge ideas. Such behaviour, we argue, is not conducive to forming shared identities and generating the social presence necessary for a productive learning environment, and may be indicative of a wider problem with online identity in e-learning. However, for some, playing the game made them reflect on online identity and consider the advantage of risk-taking and being more proactive. We conclude that, as well as providing insight into how identity is perceived online, the game has potential as a learning tool to overcome the problems of lack of social presence and the resulting superficial levels of interaction in online learning.

Background and Theoretical Rationale

In this section we introduce a social constructionist interpretation of identity and explain why developing a common group identity is important for learners when communicating online. After critiquing both Turkle (1995) on the liberating effect of the absence of physicality and Salmon’s (2000, 2002) widely used five-stage model, we explain how our identity game was designed not
only to facilitate greater understanding of identity issues, but also to promote deeper levels of online communication.

**What is Identity and Why is it Important for E-learning?**

Learning in most areas of HE is acknowledged to be a social and interactive process and a learner's identity influences how a potential learner will respond. Traditional educational researchers have for a long time acknowledged the relationships between social identities and experiences of learning and there is a particularly extensive literature on gender and education. For example, in the gender and science education literature, incompatibility between female identities and scientist identities has had a detrimental effect on the number of girls studying physical science (Hughes, 2001). While much of traditional educational research takes an essentialist view of identity, categorising learners into rigid groups based on, for example, gender, ethnicity, class and so on, the social constructionist view of identity rejects biological determinism and asserts that such identities are socially reproduced. Postmodernists go further to argue that there is no authentic ‘self’ and that identity is both fragmented and under continual (re)construction. Thus, being female or male is not merely an expression of innate biological characteristics, it is a complex and unstable identity which is generated through discourse, including the discourses of biological sex (Butler, 1990; Haraway, 1991; Tannen, 1994). From this perspective the relationship between identity and learning is unpredictable. Nevertheless, there have been efforts to theorise identity in online communities.

The importance of developing a common identity in online learning communities is well established and the literature explores some of the complexity of identity construction. Henri & Pudelko (2003) distinguish online communities of interest, in which member identities are aligned with the topic of interest, from communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), where the community develops a collective practice identity such as school teachers or physicists. Psychologists Rogers and Lea (2005) go deeper to differentiate multiple layers of ‘self’ in their Social Identity model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE). They distinguish a personal identity from a range of possible social identities such as gender, ethnicity or organisational affiliation or interests. They argue that it is a shared social identity that gives participants a sense of ‘belonging’ to a group rather than interpersonal exchanges, and that such a social presence can be experienced online in the absence of physical presence. This sense of social presence is, they argue, key to the level of commitment of group members. Their conclusion – that using sophisticated technologies to make available pictures or video of virtual participants does not promote social presence as much as having a common social group identity – goes against received wisdom in the e-learning community (see, for example, Kirkup, 2001). They assert, furthermore, that CMC will work well if there is a shared identity, based on a shared practice or body of knowledge such as Wenger advocates. But if there are salient social group identities which are not congruent, they contend, then these can get in the way of developing common ground. Many social identities produce emotions related to social hierarchies and prejudices and this is why difficulties in group cohesion can arise in groups that meet physically as well as in those which meet only virtually. Rogers and Lea suggest using anonymity as a possible solution online, at least in the early stages of group forming, so that incongruities which could arise from the gender, ethnicity or job status of others do not have an inhibiting effect on communication.

While such advocates of anonymity assume that identity is stable and can be hidden by removing names or affiliations from messages, others have shown that the Internet has made it easy for some to invent a whole gamut of identities in online personae or avatars and so forth. (Turkle, 1995; Kirkup, 2001). This has brought a new challenge to the notion that identity is stable and coherent. Turkle (1995) states that through the Internet ‘our views of the self, new images of multiplicity, heterogeneity, flexibility, and fragmentation dominate current thinking about human identity’ (p.178). She cites examples where deliberate exploration of new identities in online chat rooms – for example, gender swapping – can be a liberating experience. Similar arguments for the individual freedoms afforded by the Internet are being put forward for the latest phenomenon of weblogs (Ewins, 2005).

Critics of Turkle argue that the liberating effect of the online world is not universally experienced and explain why. Constructing an identity online requires drawing on a repertoire of
social behaviours and values, and these may be restricting. Gendered identities online, for example, may draw on stereotypical behaviours of males as sexually predatory and females as coy and submissive to be convincing, and Zdenek (1999) has demonstrated how even artificial computer programmes which appear to have an identity – so-called bots – are written to mimic such stereotypical behaviours.

In addition, although creation of identity through online discourse is a deliberate process as Turkle (1995) describes, identity can also be expressed through language use, style and discursive conventions, which the sender and receiver may or may not be aware of. Turkle’s liberatory approach assumes that language is transparent, but a range of psychologists and linguists have found correlations between, for example, gender and language use. Thompson & Murachver (2001) suggest from their research that learners are able to identify the gender of the writer of an anonymous email quite successfully from both the topics discussed and to some extent the language use. Herring (1994) has also demonstrated that there are gendered styles of communication online, such as dominant styles or co-operative styles, which mirror offline conversational discourse, and these can reproduce unequal power relationships as, for example, in sexual harassment (Spender, 1995). Similarly, textual communications might provide identity clues for class background, native language/origin and ethnicity and again there is the potential for hierarchies to operate for the benefit of some and to the detriment or exclusion of others. Without visual or auditory cues, text requires constructing and deconstructing in a different way from conversations where there is physical presence, and the lack of research in this area means that it is not at all clear how well online communicators are developing what we term online ‘listening’ skills which enable them to read textual social cues about identity and power and deal with related emotional responses.

It is therefore hardly surprising that from the evidence so far many learners feel frustrated, excluded or uncomfortable in online discourse and respond by not engaging (Hughes & Lewis, 2003). Some participants do find online discussion liberating because they are not being judged by physical presence, but others find the text-based experience disquieting and unreal (see, for example Kirkup, 2001; Bayne, 2004). It has been argued that reason and emotion cannot be kept separate in online discourse (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2004) and thus it follows that participants who do not feel secure in their social presence might be reluctant to share information and learn with others. There is certainly evidence that few students are readily able to reflect and construct knowledge together critically in online discourse (Seale & Cann, 2000).

We suggest that to develop shared social identities online and experience online presence, learners need to develop this ability to ‘listen’ online and interpret the identities and behaviours of others. Social engagement is promoted in a model for collaborative online learning developed by Gilly Salmon at the Open University as a process for training e-moderators, but we will argue next that the socialisation stage she proposes may not be enough to address the online identity construction and social presence issues discussed above.

**Learning Bit by Byte: Salmon’s model for developing online communication skills**

Salmon’s (2000, 2002) five-step model has been widely adopted for introducing learners to computer conferencing. The sequenced stages of Salmon’s model, which develop both technical and conferencing skills in tandem, are easy to apply and provide a useful framework for structuring online activities. The stages are:

1. Access and Motivation
2. Online Socialisation
3. Information Exchange
4. Knowledge Construction
5. Development (e.g. of ability to moderate conferences)

It is the online socialisation step, necessary for the more cognitive interaction in the later stages, which is of interest to us. Salmon (2002, p. 22) acknowledges that in the socialisation stage ‘participants need not only to get to know each other’s online persona and approaches, but also to understand each other’s intentions, hopes and even dreams.’ She suggests that simple strategies such as using an informal café/bar discussion area to mimic a conventional setting or
conversational prompts, such as asking participants to describe their surroundings, are sufficient for giving participants a sense of social presence and to establish group communication protocols.

Salmon’s model aims to get CMC participants comfortable and familiar with sending and answering online messages through taking them through incremental stages which require completion of numerous bite-sized activities termed ‘e-tivities’. These are unthreatening and initially do not require much deliberation. Such an approach might be very successful for getting participants familiar with the communication software and basic protocols, and others agree that conferences do need to be well facilitated, structured and managed (Harasim et al, 1997). The downside is that the bite-sized approach to online messaging, which is consistent with the more managerialist and reductionist discourses of education (Conrad, 2003), is likely to keep the discourse at a superficial level. Some of the more contentious issues such as misinterpretation of humour, insults, domineering participants, stereotypical assumptions and non-contribution, all of which might intertwine with issues of status, gender, class, ethnicity and so on, are unlikely to be raised explicitly. Potentially destructive undercurrents may prevent the development of shared group social identities and restrict online presence and the group commitment required for collaborative learning.

Salmon’s solution is that e-moderators will run the conference and ensure that it is equitable and inclusive. Her e-moderators are trained on how to intervene if a participant is not taking part in a conference but not to ask why the participant might have been excluded or be reluctant to take part in the first place. Here the e-moderator is empowered to manage the discourse but not the participants themselves – that is, not until they reach level five, when they will have enough experience to manage their own conferences. But there is no clear evidence that learners will progress through Salmon’s levels, and while there are very successful groups which form online, a common complaint from teaching colleagues is that learners take part in the easier early stages of a course or module where socialisation is encouraged, but many drop out when collaborative learning starts and deeper and more complex interactions are expected. We therefore propose that an addition to Salmon’s approach might be to offer learners insight into the interpretation and management of online discourse early on in their use of CMC. This will empower them from the start, rather than waiting until they accumulate experience, by which time many might have fallen by the wayside. This proposition is the basis of the online identity game which we examine next.

Developing an Identity Game as Part of E-learning Programmes

We have argued above that successful online communication requires participants to at least be aware of the construction of self and the constructions of others and that a good understanding of identity and relevant behaviours might improve learners’ experiences of working together online.

We proposed that developing Turkle’s online identity swapping into an explicit identity game could make transparent some of the processes of online identity construction that are not explicitly addressed in Salmon’s model and help learners become confident with online presence and perhaps ensure that their knowledge construction becomes more fruitful.

Our initial aim for the game was to give those involved an awareness of the extent to which they are naturally ‘fabricating’ and re-aligning aspects of their own identity, often while being quite unaware of doing so, and that identities can be expressed not only through social behaviours and values but also though language and interaction style. We were also interested in whether making identity more transparent would open up confidence for communicating in potentially emotionally charged and risky ways – for example, in challenging other participants to justify points raised or disagreeing with them. After the game had run we realised that how the players behaved during the game was as revealing of their approach to online identity and online community as were their reflections on the learning experience and we decided to perform an analysis of the structure of the game as well as of players’ commentary.

The game was initially developed for two staff development programmes which could temporarily amalgamate to make possible mixing with ‘strangers’. The first was one of a number of online learning sequences in a new programme for staff at Imperial College London, the ‘Supporting Learning and Teaching Programme’ (SLTP). Some participants, but not all, were involved with e-learning or learning technologies. At the point at which they experienced the
game, they knew each other fairly well and had become familiar with the virtual learning environment (VLE), WebCT.

The second programme was the master’s level wholly online course, ‘The Application of Learning Technologies’, at the University of East London. The course was aimed at both teaching staff and support staff such as learning technologists. Because online collaboration was already established in the programme, the game was presented as an optional activity for participants.

The principle of using familiarity with a particular VLE in order to amalgamate two distant learner groups is one that has been used before (Lengel, Peacock & Scott, 1999). Both groups of learners shared the same VLE, a similar learner profile and the theme of e-learning in their course, helping to put participants on an equal footing. Learners were not assessed on their performance.

The Design of the Game

The game was described to participants as ‘a short collaborative venture to find out how easy it is to set up and maintain a fictional identity online’. Participants were placed in self-moderating, closed-discussion forums in anonymous, randomly selected groups of five or six. They were briefed to present themselves as they normally would in all respects except for one aspect, to be chosen from age, gender and nationality, which they would alter. In all other respects they were instructed to be accurate and tell the ‘truth’.

Participants were told to introduce themselves to their group and to ask and answer questions to determine which presentations by the other members were deliberately contrived as false. While conducting this investigation, players were maintaining their own pretence in the face of questioning on the part of others. The game lasted one working week and players were encouraged to log in at least once per day.

This game was explicitly designed not to result in ‘winners’ and ‘losers’, although we anticipated that individuals would justifiably feel some sense of success if they could either maintain the secret of their fabricated characteristic throughout the period of the game or, alternatively, make a successful challenge to another’s pretences.

We expected the game to be challenging at times and appreciated that participants’ responses might vary. The very essence of what could be perceived as ‘lying’ (although we tried to avoid this negative term), of pretence and of consciously distorting one’s identity, might affect different people in markedly different ways (cf. Whitty, 2002). While we took a postmodern view of identity construction, we did not assume the participants would start from this position. We expected, however, that participants would be able to distinguish between an identity reconstruction based on deliberately changing a factual part of their background, such as number of years of age or name, and the usually unconscious presentation of themselves as an authentic person fitting a social category which might normally occur in social discourse.

Methodology and Analysis of the Game

The game took place twice, once for a week in September 2003 and again in June 2004. Each institution has acted as host. On both occasions the two tutors (the authors of this article) participated on the same basis as the students – in the sense that we were unaware of who was in our group – and we adhered to the same rules. Clearly there were always differences, on the first occasion because of having planned and designed the activity, and on the second, additionally, because of the insights which the first engagement with the game had given us.

Researchers as Participants

We initially took part in the game for pedagogical rather than methodological reasons, to reduce the distance between tutors and learners, but this has implications for our methodology. On the one hand, we were the designers of the game and we analysed the online discussions of the game participants using a content analysis system which we reviewed and amended during the analysis. For this part of the work we positioned ourselves as detached observers and focused on the texts rather than on our own experiences of the game. On the other hand, we analysed our own
contributions in the same manner as we did for other players and viewed the project as a piece of experiential research. Such a subjective approach conflicts with positivist research paradigms. But feminist epistemologists have long questioned the ‘masculine’ objectivity claims in both natural and social sciences (Haraway, 1991; Stanley & Wise, 1993) and have argued that interpreting data from clearly expressed experiential standpoints is a more appropriate and valid way of generating knowledge (Harding, 1991). Harding argues that ‘not just opinions but also a culture’s best beliefs – what it calls knowledge – are socially situated’ and that ‘research directed by social values and political agendas can nevertheless produce empirically and theoretically preferable results’ (1991, p. 119).

The analysis that emerges from this data evolved from our standpoints as both participants and researchers. In blurring this boundary we do not make claims to be wholly objective, but we anticipate rich and meaningful data from being ‘close’ to the experience of the research participants.

**Mix of Participants**

Of the 26 people from the first cohort who were given access to the game (10 from UEL and 16 from Imperial), 21 took part (8 UEL, 13 Imperial). The group was female dominated, with only 3 men, but there was a good mix of ethnicities. Most made a reasonable attempt to play although some clearly did not finish. In the second group there were 21 invited players (18 from Imperial and 3 from UEL) and all except one participated. Of these 4 were men and 16 were women. Again, a range of ethnicities was represented.

**Discourse Analysis**

To investigate how participants played the game as well as their experiences of the game, we analysed texts from the online discourse generated by the game as well as the feedback and reflection from players. For the first game, participants had the opportunity to reflect on the experience during a plenary discussion. For the second game, to gain more insight, we invited participants to write a 500-word reflective account of their experience of taking part, but the response was limited. Some participants also provided their views on the game as part of their course feedback.

Online communications are both written texts and conversations and as such offer multiple options for discourse analysis of language use, communication of beliefs and interaction in social situations (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 1997). To analyse how players engaged with the game, a content analysis of types of interaction (adapted from Henri, 1991) was performed on the ten private group discussions of identity and a plenary which was open to all. Reflective accounts produced outside the VLE were used to help make sense of the emerging analysis. As expected, the macro-level pattern of interaction in the online discourse followed the stages of the game and the reflection afterwards. The messages recorded in the VLE and the other texts were therefore coded according to these stages and any material not fitting into the game was categorised as communication not of direct relevance to following the instructions of the game.

The categories of interaction identified are shown in Table I. These categories were examined for both typical and atypical interactions and the participants’ reflections were used to help interpret their behaviours. Further analysis of messages was employed in some instances to interpret the conventions of turn taking and politeness (Fairclough, 1995). In other instances, the social use of language in the text was interrogated to provide interpretations that were not immediately obvious (Van Dijk, 1997).

**Playing the Game**

The following section presents and discusses the types of interaction generated through the game and interweaves participants’ reflections on the experience. The most common types of interaction were basic information exchange and indirectly relevant ‘chatting’. Questioning to uncover...
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fabrications and the guessing and revealing of contrived identities in the denouement were much rarer.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition of interaction</th>
<th>Indicator(s)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Providing information</td>
<td>Facts, e.g. age, gender, nationality, brief account of interests or family details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requesting information</td>
<td>Short specific questions requesting factual information, e.g. on hobbies or family.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questioning for precise detail and to uncover deliberate fabrications</td>
<td>Question is challenging in that it seeks personal opinions or asks about deliberate omissions or precise detail.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giving opinions or revealing explicit detail</td>
<td>States an opinion, e.g. likes or dislikes, makes comparisons, elaborates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guessing the identity deliberately reconstructed by a player</td>
<td>A statement on the accuracy of the age, gender or nationality presented by another player.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revealing of a deliberately reconstructed online identity to others in the group</td>
<td>A statement to indicate a falsely presented age, gender or nationality of a player.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflecting on participating in the game</td>
<td>Comments on finding time to take part, or reflections on the process, e.g. what works well and what does not work in identity de/construction.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not directly relevant to the game, chatting</td>
<td>None of the above: clearly a posting about something which is not directly to do with playing the game.</td>
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Table 1. Categories of interaction

Basic Information Exchange

In all groups of players, requesting or providing basic information were the most frequent interactions. A typical posting included both provision of information and one or more requests, for example:

I’m 47 years old, married with no children and I’m British. I’ve lived in London for over 25 years but only intended to stay for a couple of years after I finished Uni. ... What do you guys do in your spare time?

Questions about interests such as films or sport or music or family were common, presumably because the answer was expected to be revealing about identity creation and these are ‘safe’ topics.

After an initial exchange of information many questions were followed up to elicit more detail, usually with a straightforward response:

Player A: ... who collects the children from school?
Player B: ... The children either travel home with friends or we have a childminder who collects them a couple of days each week, since we both work full time.

At this simple level of interaction, maintaining a fictional identity was not difficult most of the time as there was little challenge and plenty of time to think of an appropriate response. Participants took a low-risk approach and did not venture into unknown terrain. Several participants admitted to basing their invented character on a partner, child or parent to help respond in a gender- or age-appropriate manner.

Nationality was seen to present more of a problem because of difficulties in providing convincing factual detail of a foreign country. Participants avoided being caught out by drawing on nationalities they knew about or even mixing nationalities: their native nationality with a foreign one. Others found they could keep their fictional character tightly controlled by drawing on repertoires of knowledge of sometimes stereotypical behaviours and they knew that they were unlikely to be challenged:

It’s pretty tricky to find out enough information about someone (without being too rude) to guess where the gaps are. You can disguise your identity by controlling things that would give you away. For example, I’m not going to say I live in Shoreditch and go clubbing if I’m pretending to be over 50. I can say I like going to the cinema and I live in central London.
This behaviour is not dissimilar to the identity swapping games described by Turkle (1995) and others and draws upon, rather than challenges, the social-identity repertoires of the participants. Most players found this activity relatively easy, safe and enjoyable.

**Stalling and Chatting**

Another interaction, relatively common in the second cohort, was stalling behaviour or chat which was not intended to be relevant to the game.

In the exchange below, Player C asks everyone a very general question about what they have for breakfast, which does not seem to be seeking identity information from others:

*Player C:* It’s only just before nine and I am hungry already, serves me right for having no breakfast. What did everyone else have for brekkie?

*Player D:* Hello, C and all. Haven’t been around for a few days – not been too well, but I’m better now. Had toast for brekkie today, with decaf coffee.

*Player E:* Hi all I had toast and strong coffee for breakfast. I need constant caffeine today because I was up till the small hours watching the fighting in the BB house. This series is great! Here’s a question for all ... what is your favourite possession? Mine has to be my mobile. I’d be lost without it!

Player C’s opening question is a ‘stream of consciousness’ rather than a deliberate attempt to elicit useful information. The subsequent conversation about breakfast appears to be shared stalling tactics or perhaps legitimately warming up to the game. Eventually Player E stops the free flow of thought and asks a contrived question about favourite possessions to start off the game.

Television viewing, health and eating habits may appear to be personal attributes but they are also possible indirect indications of social identity and therefore could be valid topics of conversation for the game. These exchanges could potentially generate useful information, especially if there were inconsistencies between these unconstrained exchanges when players were off guard and the more contrived exchanges. There was no reference to this possible tactic, which could indicate that identity is not something these participants would usually reflect upon when they socialise online.

**Questioning for Detail and to Uncover Deliberate Fabrications**

Most contestants were too busy maintaining their fictional identity to probe others for detail. For example:

I didn’t ask enough questions because I spent too much time trying to defend and maintain my identity as ‘Phil’ rather than looking for clues as to who others might be.

Providing detail and expressing opinion run more risk of revealing identity and, not surprisingly, were not offered voluntarily. But, despite the need to ‘catch’ players out because producing a convincing new identity was relatively easy, probing questions were rare. In this example of questioning, Player F sought an opinion from a South American player:

*Player F:* Jim – how old were you when you moved to England and how do you compare the lifestyle between the two places?

*Player G:* I do not remember How Old I was really? Let me think I believe I was 25. Regarding lifestyle it is more relaxed a not so fast as here there is always time for a siesta. London is very busy and people not very friendly always reading a book in the tube. They really do not a look at you. I believe is just a different culture also very cosmopolitan.

The detail here was based on personal experience – the player was indeed from South America – and so was fairly effortless to construct. If a deliberate untruth was being probed it would be much more risky to give a detailed answer or an opinion and it would be tempting to avoid answering the question. The following question was asked of a British contestant who pretended to be half Thai.

A question for you, (H): do you look more Thai or more British? And (sorry, personal questions necessary for this exercise:-;)

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Conventions of turn taking, as adhered to in the above example, would dictate that this question be answered. The question was not answered, or even acknowledged, indicating that the second player may be hiding something, but there was no challenge to this evasion from Player H. One player regretted not being more proactive in such cases:

I found that people could ignore questions that they didn’t really want to answer, and in our group we were all rather too polite to ask searching deep questions to get more detailed answers.

If we had been nastier I think we would have better tested people’s ability to lie.

Others were also reluctant to ask personal questions because they applied real-world conventions of ‘politeness’ to the online game. ‘Richard’ uses an indirect question with an almost apologetic qualifier, ‘hope you don’t mind me asking’, to ask ‘Gloria’ politely about her age:

You don’t say how old you are – hope you don’t mind me asking – but I wondered how long you lived in Munich and how long in London.

But politeness did not always prompt an answer; Gloria did not reply to most of the questions asked and was described by another player as ‘enigmatic’. We never found out who ‘Gloria’ was except that from a revelation of her offline name she was not completely reconstructing her gender.

By the end of the discussion it became clear that Gloria was thinking more deeply about identifying others than about presenting herself and that is why she did not respond:

(I) was not sure about the direct question about Gloria’s age – although Richard later expressed an interest in retiring to the sea I thought that the question about age was likely to have come from a younger person.

Thus she realised that the nature of a question can be revealing. She attributed a cheeky question about age to a young person overriding the factual detail given about Richard’s retirement. Her behaviour was unusual in that she put more emphasis on uncovering the identities of others rather than giving away information about herself. Other players seemed to notice this and that could be why she was described as enigmatic.

The Denouement

It was very rare for entire groups to reach the point of challenging all others’ fabrications, even in a group where one of the participants, Pineapple (in the second game all contributors were allocated the name of a fruit as their logon identity) set up a simple format:

Here are my guesses about the changed parts of everybody’s identities:

Lemon – not female?
Canteloupe – not male?
Sloe – not Scottish?
Orange – not male?

Each of the others in this group copied this style of challenge without comment, indicating that this first move was a good model for the denouement stage. But only one of the five responded by acknowledging that her gender had been correctly attributed:

Everybody guessed me correctly – I am not a man!!!
Did I get anyone right?
Canteloupe

Other groups of players did not complete exchanging their views on the fabricated identities. This could be through deliberate evasiveness, emotional discomfort, running out of time to finish, or possibly through an oversight, but in any case there was no evidence of any attempt to encourage others to finish.

Exploring identity is intricate and potentially unsettling and the game provoked some anxiety, which was very different from the liberation felt by Turkle’s experienced players of identity-swapping games. Far from exploring a fluidity of identity, this denouement discourse is one of very clear-cut social identities such as male or female and of being right or wrong. Making a public guess
about identity and then being told you are wrong is risky. Even as designers of the game we were anxious about making an incorrect assumption in public and possibly offending someone:

I was also worried about making a fool of myself! And I think I did. I challenged someone in my group who had only posted 2 messages, of being a woman ... whom I knew to be both very busy and rather technophobic and hesitant online. In fact it was one of the male learning technologists! Fortunately for me, I do not think he has bothered to come back into the forum since I posted that, I am still cringing…

It is therefore not surprising that other players, in a less powerful position, found the game challenging and withdrew before the end. Caution about etiquette over asking about age was mentioned earlier but asking about gender (often done through enquiring about a name) and nationality would not take participants beyond the bounds of social courtesy. However, perceiving age, gender or nationality ‘incorrectly’ is awkward in ‘real’ situations and thus could be equally humiliating online.

Players who did attempt to identify the consciously fabricated identities usually found it difficult to do so as the fabrications in the main were very convincing. Some based their guesses on hunches but could not explain their reasoning. A few contributors showed that they realised that language use could be a more subtle give-away especially if English was an additional language for a player. One non-native English speaker was concerned that use of language might give nationality away.

Nationality is also not easy for hiding, because ‘you are what you speak’ (New Scientist, Vol. 176 No. 2371).

A few other players realised that language and writing style could provide clues to identity as well as the content of messages:

I found myself trying to read between the lines to identify things in styles of writing that would give away gender/age/nationality rather than the actual answers that were being given.

One learner was able to use knowledge of language to her advantage. A British player who pretended to be American provided a convincing use of the American term 'gotten':

It was quite a shock to get used to the size of average UK homes. However, we’ve been here long enough now to have gotten used to most things and we’ve loved being here.

She explained:

I lived in Canada and the US for several years and thought I could perhaps get away with it as I’m familiar with places and phraseology.

Thus the game did make it clear to some that there is more to online textual exchange than the content or information exchange and that they are engaging in a conversation with social conventions and rules that may be influenced by offline experiences but without the visual cues. However, the online ‘listening’ skills that would enable participants to ‘read between the lines’ and even challenge convention were only exhibited by a small minority.

Online ‘Listening’ Skills and Implications for Online Communication

Putting the player into this deliberately artificial situation where they were required to conduct an online discourse made transparent some of the underlying behaviours and anxieties which could inhibit use of online communication for learning purposes. Participants were over-concerned with how they presented themselves, and were quite skilled at this, but they spent little time reflecting on what others were saying, or not saying, even though this game gave explicit permission to probe others for detail.

The game enabled participants to appreciate that constructing an online identity through presenting factual knowledge is fairly straightforward. Many players understood that, for the familiar aspects of identity addressed in the game, what people tell you gives only a partial picture and that getting to know one’s collaborators well requires a certain amount of risk-taking and probing. A typical reflection on the game was:
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It was good fun and something I had never experienced before. ... It really taught me that online identity is tricky to judge and it is quite easy to fabricate an identity.

However, most contributors based their constructions of identity and interpretations of identity on the content of messages – that is, on factual information and reporting of the frequently stereotypical social behaviours and values that take place offline – and not on behaviours and language style online. They viewed identity as something clearly defined and authentic and the fact that they could create a new identity online did not destabilise this view. One player reflected:

It could be made more interesting by creating a whole new identity rather than by just changing one aspect of an identity, which felt rather artificial, as it would give more scope for creativity.

Here, identity is viewed as fixed and ‘whole’ and the conscious reconstruction of an aspect of identity is an artificial change. Within such a discourse, getting an identity ‘wrong’ is a serious mistake and not part of a legitimate process of getting to know someone better. With such a confusion between identity as authentic and identity as malleable, which could easily occur online in contexts other than this game, nervousness over online identity is more likely to inhibit conversation than enhance it.

Despite this tension, other reflections on the game suggested that it enabled some contributors to begin to develop online ‘listening’ skills – that is, the ability to interpret language use and style as well as content of messages. The game also helped them to consider how to facilitate deeper levels of discussion by being more proactive and questioning as well as the need to negotiate unclear politeness conventions and emotional responses online.

We have shown that a more sophisticated level of online communication involving ‘reading between the lines’ was only achieved by a minority and that the game was mostly interpreted to be about identity maintenance rather than identity interrogation. Such online behaviour, where presentation of self online is prioritised over interpreting the presentations of others, may have a negative effect on collaborative e-learning. First, this behaviour is not helpful for developing common group identities and the sense of group presence that is needed for the successful cooperation and collaboration online proposed by CMC theorists (e.g. McConnell, 2000; Salmon, 2000, 2002; Rogers & Lea, 2005). Second, without practice in online listening skills, groups might not readily be able to manage group and interpersonal dynamics and power relations. They will either be dependent on an expert e-moderator or individuals may be over-cautious about challenging the ideas of others and even opt out of group collaboration. If the two underlying online identity issues suggested in this study – namely, the lack of attention to the social identities of others and deficiency of skills in interpreting group dynamics and behaviours – are part of a wider problem, then this may have a negative effect on collaborative learning online. Learners’ lack of the skills for interpreting others and managing social conventions and discourses of power, or reluctance to develop them, could help explain why the potential of constructivist collaborative learning in this medium is not always realised.

Conclusion

Taking part in this game gave us and some of our learners opportunities to understand online identity and social conventions in more depth than would normally occur as part of e-learning. Such a game is a good way of motivating adult learners, most of whom do not have experience of Internet chat rooms or online communities, to explore potentially difficult areas of presenting self and interpreting identities of others, and could help overcome some of the nervousness about asking and answering probing questions needed to develop social presence online. However, the behaviours exhibited in the game suggest that lack of awareness of, or insecurity over, online identity encourages interaction only at a superficial level and not at the level of sensitively challenging others, risk-taking and asking in-depth questions. The experiences of this game support the theoretical position that online identity and social presence in CMC can be generated through text, but we suggest adding a prerequisite that collaborators need to develop their online communication and listening skills to ensure group cohesiveness. Without an understanding of one’s own and others’ online identity construction, motivation to learn through a sense of belonging to a group could easily be destabilised and poorly understood social identities could
obstruct the development of trust, shared knowledge and inclusivity. If collaborative learning online is to have wider success and appeal, then the issues of online identity and presence need more attention and questions about how learners might acquire the more sophisticated online listening skills need to be addressed.

It would be interesting to change the rules of the game in favour of identity probing to see if this resulted in a greater number of interactions at a deeper level and more ‘reading between the lines’. Players could also be challenged on rigid views of identity and especially stereotypical assumptions or exclusive behaviours. In making the game more challenging in terms of risk-taking, there is always a danger of alienating learners from online communication, but, in the spirit of ‘no pain, no gain’, learning online, like any form of learning, is never going to be effortless and undemanding.

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