

# Forming Gamer Identification through Steam's Metagaming

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## ABSTRACT

The digital gaming client Steam, owned by Valve Corporation, has become an increasingly popular platform for purchasing and maintaining a library of digital games. The platform itself can be seen as a form of metagame, that has the potential to influence the purchasing decision of players on the platform. The exploration of gamer identification, defined as a player's choice of hardware, gaming platform and system, game selection, and approach to socialization in gaming platforms, is conducted through previous understanding of avatar identification commonly found in games. The method proposed in the paper is to conduct a survey of Steam users with non-limited user accounts, and ask how their interaction, customization, and investment in the platform is related to their personal self-expression. The survey should be used as a start point to understand potential areas of research, and to get a general idea of how users might use the platform to express themselves.

## INTRODUCTION

The digital gaming client Steam, owned by Valve Corporation, has become an increasingly popular platform for personal computer gamers to purchase and maintain a library of digital games (Steam, and IGN 2018). It allows players to socialize with other players through a network of player profiles, chatrooms, and the integration of player information into multiplayer game servers. With the growth of the platform, Valve has increased focused towards player-oriented experiences which include the implementation of trading card collecting, badge crafting, user level ranking, profile customization, and event participation rewards ("Steam Trading Cards..." 2013). Each of these features provide individual benefits to the player, such as trading unwanted emoticons within the Steam community for profile trading cards, but can also be used in a complimentary manner to each other, such as crafting badges by collecting sets of trading cards or selling trading cards for actual currency to purchase games from the storefront, to help build the player's presence on the platform.

In this way, the Steam platform itself becomes a game in which players, the platform's users, can participate by trading, collecting, and customizing their profile and player data to reflect their role and prestige within the Steam community. The platform becoming a game itself is an occurrence of a *metagame*, which is described by Stephanie Boluk and Patrick LeMieux as "not just how games interface with life: it is the environment within which games 'live' in the first place" (3). This definition suggests that metagames are not only way to implement components of everyday life into games, such as completing tasks within a set amount of time, but that metagames are also the way in which players

form and execute methods of play using the components of a game's system. The metagame of speed-running, where players attempt to complete a game as quickly as possible using potential bugs in the game's system to bypass intended game design barriers and scripted cinematic game scenes, provides a way for viewing a metagame as something that pulls from life, in this case the need to complete a task as quickly as possible, and as an environment within which the game lives, as speed-running can be a component of a game shipped by designers, in this case racing games, or as a component of the game found within the surrounding community of the game's environment. Therefore, metagames are not limited to how players and designers initially perceive the rules and structure of a game in relation to the non-digital world and its correspondents to the world outside of the game, as they provide players the opportunity to follow or exploit a game's system structure for any reason they desire and can result in outcomes much different than initially intended by the game's designers.

While Valve has directly implemented metagames into the design of existing annual summer sales through minigames, the metagames that arise out of everyday use of the platform present a unique opportunity to better understand players and their motivations ("Monster Summer Game" 2015). An example of the Steam metagame can be found in the platform's trading card and badge crafting system wherein players receive trading cards from spending time in-game, participating in community events, or by purchasing cards through the Steam Community Market ("Introducing Steam Trading Cards"). The cards can then be used to build sets that correspond to a specific game title, such as *BioShock Infinite* or *Undertale*, or a Steam event, such as the annual summer or winter sales. Once a player has collected all the cards in a set, they can craft a badge that rewards them with a digital emblem to be showcased on their community profile and 100 experience points towards their next Steam Level, which is a leveling system on the platform.

While this process of collecting cards and crafting badges might be considered a superficial or unimportant functionality of the Steam community, it offers the emergence of a metagame that encourages players to express themselves through gameplay of the platform itself. The arising metagame can create friendly, or potentially fierce, competitions wherein players attempt to be the first to craft a badge among a group of friends, receive the most overall badges on the platform between a group of players, or attempt to increase their Steam Level with the least diverse collection of badges possible be. While other features exist on the platform that encourage and afford their own forms of metagaming, such as tracking a player's game collection size, the trading card system provides insight into the potential applications of the platform's system design that encourages players to express themselves through the metagame that emerges from the platform's features.

The purpose of this study to determine if player expression through the Steam metagame affects players' choices in selecting new game titles, the period within which they will purchase new titles, and their interaction with other players on the platform. The use of metagaming on the Steam platform as a form of player expression can potentially provide insight to a higher level of identification among players that I term *gamer identification*, which I define as a player's choice of hardware, gaming platform and system, game selection, and approach to socialization in gaming platforms. Gamer identification can be examined through our understanding of avatar identification, which is a phenomenon in gaming where gamers can select a 3D model, 2D image, or other form of

representation, generally of a visual nature, to represent and express their offline personality inside the game world. Since avatar identification can influence the way players interact with the game world, gamer identification could potentially show ways in which players invest time and money into games on Steam based on their expression through the platform's metagame. Further, the consideration for players who create avatars with little or no regard for their offline personality should be accounted for, as there is potential for individuals to exploit the metagame in a way that does not represent their offline personality.

Recent research has examined avatar identification as a means of expressing personality or individual characteristics through the surveying of Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) players. Studies conducted in "Offline Personality and Avatar Customisation. Discrepancy Profiles and Avatar Identification in a Sample of MMORPG Players," "Fostering Intrinsic Motivation through Avatar Identification in Digital Games," and "Impact of Avatar Identification on Online Gamer Loyalty: Perspectives of Social Identity and Social Capital Theories" utilize avatar identification to examine the relationship between players' personalities, motivations, and loyalties through surveys conducted about their interaction with digital games. The studies explore the outcomes of players' connections with avatars that represent their identity and their personal expression in a game, while also exploring how players create avatars that lack representation or avatar identification will interact and play in those same game environments.

These studies examine the impact of avatar identification through the play of specific game titles that belong to designated genres and involve player representation through a direct connection to a humanoid avatar. The methods used to conduct these studies are beneficial to understanding the way in which players view their personal identification with the avatar they have created, or how being assigned an avatar can affect a player's motivation in interacting with a game. What these studies do not examine is the representation of players through platforms that showcase user information through text and image, and how the profiles players keep on these platforms affects their approach and willingness to interact with the platform. This leaves a gap in research that focuses on the behavior of gamers towards the platforms upon which the games they play are marketed, hosted, sold, and cataloged. It also does not provide an examination of a lower level of social interaction that is linked more closely with the world outside of the game as platforms can provide more insight to the various game communities that players belong outside of a particular title.

This study can help provide an understanding of the way in which gaming platforms themselves become a game which allows players to represent and express themselves, and how this affects players' choices in interacting with the platform. By exploring the identity of gamers through the Steam platform and its impact on their purchase and social decision making, it can provide game designers with a better understanding of the integration of their games with the platforms that will sell or host the games services. Further, it can provide insight for future studies to explore the connection between players' backgrounds and desire to represent themselves as a motivation for metagaming a platform, and how this can correlate to the ways in which these players abide by or abuse a platform.

This proposed research will explore an area of identification among gamers on the Steam platform through the implementation of metagaming as part of the platform's interface. Through the

implementation of prior research of avatar identification, I will compare a player's experience of making an avatar for a digital game and its effect on their interaction with the game with the experience of a player who interacts with making and maintain a user account with the gaming platform Steam. By exploring parallels between the metagaming of Steam with a player's selection of an avatar, this study will also explore the idea of avatar creation as a form of metagame itself that has the potential of yielding avatar identification as a form of reward. This study can help future researchers and game designers understand how gamers' backgrounds, knowledge, and culture affect their creation of an avatar and its role in their interaction with games, and the potential for avatar identification to occur in gaming platforms upon which games rely for marketing, hosting, and community connectivity.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The ways in which players identify with a digital game avatar and the effect it has on their approach to in-game interaction has been well researched. Much of the current research on avatar identification provides insight into how the customization of avatars in MMORPG environments can be reflective of the players' offline personalities, and the extent to which they invest in games based on the connection they have with their avatar. In collecting literature for this research project, three areas of interest have arisen: Player Expression, Player Motivation, and Gamer Loyalty. These areas have influenced my approach in exploring the development of *gamer identification* through the Steam platform and how the platform's metagame can affect the choices players' make when interacting with it.

### *Player Expression*

Player expression is in the games they play in multiple ways. In "Offline personality and avatar customisation. Discrepancy profiles and avatar identification in a sample of MMORPG players" by Tiziana Mancini and Federica Sibilla, the expression of a player's actual or ideal personality into their avatar was explored. The relation between a players' depiction of their digital avatar and their offline personalities as the starting point for their avatar's creation was explored. Macini and Sibilla utilized a sample of 854 participants who self-reported the extent to which a characteristic in the questionnaire related to their actual self, ideal self, and primary avatar. The findings of the study indicated that the intention of players lies "at the level of overall social desirability" when designing an avatar (Mancini & Sibilla 2017). In proceeding with my research, social desirability is a consideration for how players might modify the appearance of their profile, participation in using trading cards, crafting badges, participating in the community events surrounding the annual summer and winter sales, and to potentially help understand their identification through their collection of games on the platform. This is important as players' intentions to create a socially desirable or undesirable experience through their interaction with the platform can be misinterpreted as their personal self-expression; understanding why they are making choices, whether it is due to social construction or self-expression, is necessary to understand how players identify as gamers.

Another topic of interest when approaching user expression is “Virtually Real: Exploring Avatar Identification in Game Addiction Among Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPG) Players,” wherein questionnaires were used to assess the correlation of self-esteem, depression, social skills, and avatar identification with game addiction among middle school students. The paper concluded that its results supported a variety of previous findings of game addiction. Most notable for my research is the consideration of avatar identification in relation to game addiction as “game addiction exists when identification with the avatar occurs” (You, Kim, & Lee 2015). My research benefits from this study as the finding provides insight into how addiction might present itself through the metagaming of the Steam platform. This is important when considering the differences between players who are collectors and those who are addicts, as some players excessively obtain games, emoticons, badges, and trading cards within the platform.

### *Player Motivation*

Motivation of players through the use of avatar identification is another area of interest. In “Fostering Intrinsic Motivation through Avatar Identification in Digital Games,” avatar identification was studied among a group of participants who played an infinite runner game. Half of the participants in the study could create a customized avatar, and the other half were assigned a random. The results of the study found “that greater identification translates into motivated behaviour as operationalized by the time spent in the endless infinite runner,” indicating a positive outlook towards the potential use of avatar identification in motivating players to continue engaging with tedious or repetitive tasks (Birk, Atkins, Bowey, & Mandryk 2016). This is a consideration for my study, as the use of the platform’s customization presents an opportunity to explore a potential connection between players who engage heavily in the platform’s metagame and their interaction with the platform as a sales device.

The relation of the avatar to the game world itself provides an opportunity to understand the motivations that arise for players based on their avatar’s use and appearance in the platform. The way players customize their avatar can result in players attempting to keep the appearance of a persona rather than playing based on how they want to. In “Investigating the impacts of avatar gender, avatar age, and region theme on avatar physical activity in the virtual world,” it is found that players using “male avatars were more likely to perform high-active physical activities” whereas “female avatars were more likely to perform low-active physical activities.” Likewise, avatars that depicted being young were more active than those that depicted being old. This indicates that there is a potential motivation in players to meet social or personal expectations for their avatar based on its depiction. On Steam, this could correlate to profile name and image, information shared on forums, and potentially even the choice of games played.

### *Gamer Loyalty*

A final component in analyzing players use of Steam’s metagame has been analyzed through gamer loyalty. Two articles, “Impact of Avatar Identification on Online Gamer Loyalty: Perspectives of Social Identity and Social Capital Theories” and “Influence of Temperament and Character on Online Gamer Loyalty: Perspectives from Personality and Flow Theories,” address this issue using theoretical frameworks surrounding avatar identification and flow theory. What these articles provide is insight into

how surveys can be conducted to correlate player attitude and self-perception towards a game and the use of an avatar. This will affect my research as I have seen methods for sampling and collecting data from user answers in questionnaires related toward avatar identification and player attitudes towards games they play. I can use this as a starting point in formulating methods for approaching Steam users to conduct my research.

## METHODS

For my research, I propose that information be collected from Steam users in the form of a survey. I believe this is ideal, as the format of a survey allows for a potentially broader sampling of players, providing more diverse data from players who play games in a variety of genres, play games from a consistent genre choice, or find players who use the platform as a development hub for game modifications. Further, a survey can provide an extensive list of data that can provide insight into specific topics for further research in specific areas. Finally, a survey provides an opportunity to collect data quickly which can be effective in capturing multiple types of Steam users throughout the year. This is important as Steam has two major sales each year that attract new players and recapturing the attention of non-frequent players, creating the potential for a wider sampling of varying players.

Since Steam is an internet-based platform, surveys will be conducted on the internet. The benefits to this are that players are more likely to take a survey that is performed on the same medium as the platform they are being questioned about. Data is more readily available immediately after a survey is taken, and integration of data from the online survey to a visualizing, graphing, or spreadsheet computer program is more likely to be seamless and lack errors in the conversion of data to the visualizing program. Finally, there is the potential for easier direction and integration of the Steam platform into the survey, as questions related directly to a component of the user's Steam account could show examples of where to locate data.

The population of the survey would be players who utilize the Steam platform. An ideal sample size would be at least 10 thousand players as it would allow for a large enough sample to collect data from a diverse set of players. This number is approximately 0.0015% of the lowest number of concurrent players on the platform in the past year, which was 11.83 million in April 2017 (Steam, and IGN 2018). Players will be assessed based on how they modify their profile, utilize trading cards, craft badges, interact with forums, review games, participate in the summer and winter sale, and build their game library. The intention is to ask the players how their approach to interacting with these components of the Steam platform relate to their personal expression, and whether they do it to represent themselves, create a representation of an ideal self, or to create a socially desirable or undesirable representation in the community.

The selection process will be based on whether the participant has purchased at least \$5 USD on Steam. The reason for this is that new Steam users are limited in community features of the platform, as Valve requires players to invest \$5 into their account before all features are unlocked and account limitations are lifted. This was implemented to reduce the creation of malicious and dummy user

accounts to make it more difficult for spam, phishing, and other attacks to occur within the platform. This is useful, as it reduces the chance of duplicate accounts that might be used to sock puppet answers on a survey, therefore skewing the results negatively. The population of the survey will not be stratified, as the intention is to collect as much initial data as possible to determine the ways in which players utilize the platform's metagame to express themselves. Finally, the margin of error in the sample is predicted to be +/- 5%, with a confidence level of 90%. It is estimate that 66% of players who have customized their profile or interacted with the Steam metagame will say it directly expresses themselves.

Instruments used in conducting the survey will include Survey Monkey and the Steam platform. Survey monkey will be used to create the survey and to collect responses from participants who take the survey. Steam will be used to verify a user's account and to take into consideration the validity of their responses. A web platform will also be built that allows for pre-survey verification, connecting all essential data from the survey and comparing it with Steam player profiles, and as a hub for participants to stay up to date with the research.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through this project, I hope to add to the body of research by exploring how gamer identification could potentially show ways in which players invest their time and money into games on Steam through their expression within the platform's metagame. This can provide opportunities for developers, publishers, and gamers to understand how the experiences and platforms that power our games are themselves an opportunity to create games and allow for player expression. Gamer identification can be analyzed as a form of avatar identification, which players experience when they feel deeply connected to their avatar and can be used to explore other aspects of gaming culture, such as how players' self-expression plays a role in the adversarial state of Xbox and PlayStation console gamers. Finally, this study presents the opportunity to explore avatar identification as a metagame itself, as comparing the similarities between the Steam metagame and avatar identification could show comparable design methods for encouraging player decision making, expression, and investment.

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