

# Development of a Virtual Identity and Social-Constructivism Through IRC (Internet Relay Chat)

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## Abstract

IRC has evolved into new strategies to build up an identity in a cyber space as well as to create important systems to be shared. This sharing is done among people who have similar interest and topics from all over the world, and they meet and talk in a virtual meeting point of the Internet. The strategies necessary in the space consist mostly of linguistic resources, since the approach to visual or auditory features such as appearance or accents are crucial factors for identity forming. This paper focuses on establishing the concept of virtual identity from the viewpoint of 'social constructivism', the idea that an identity can be readily changed due to its fluid nature in the cyberspace and by a participant's willingness, unlike the essentialist view of a unified and coherent identity. Based on the theoretical framework of social-constructivism, it is meaningful to analyze how chat participants may develop and sustain their identity in IRC chatrooms by using several linguistic and/or graphic resources such as nicks, emoticons, actions and gestures, graphic cues, topic choice, and interpersonal strategies on the web.

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**Keywords:** Virtual Identity, IRC (Internet Relay Chat), Social-constructivism, Visual cues, Interpersonal strategies

## 1. Introduction

Over the last decades, online communication has changed and developed from text only to more diverse forms of sound and graphics. One of the most basic forms of synchronous CMC (Computer-mediated Communications) is IRC (Internet Relay Chat). Technological developments will change IRC remarkably as well. However, the interaction by typing on IRC on its own has some significant benefits: 1) Participants can contribute to discussions on an equal basis; 2) The interaction between participants is enhanced; 3) Those who feel shy in real life have an opportunity to participate more actively.

There is no competition for the floor – everyone who types, hits

'Enter', and is not the victim of netsplit, will eventually be "heard." Saini (2014) also explained that easy access to Internet connectivity and an ability of maintaining anonymity has the ability of making online chatting very common in online world more than any other tool. However, it is the anonymous character of IRC in its present state that results to such innovative playfulness and such intriguing experiments with identity (Bechar-Israeli, 1995). People have tried their possible best to make it look as much like face-to-face communication (Yarosz & Fountain, 2005). Thus, IRC can be defined as "communication which is real time or instantaneous" (Wulf, 1996, p.50). IRC is a "text-based conferencing system that allows users to chat via the network in real time" (Cheung, 1995:1). To be more elaborate, IRC offers a "means by which one user can type a message in real time to one or more Internet users, and almost instantaneously, the message appears on the monitors of all the others who are monitoring the transmission" (Simpson, 2000, p.1). On IRC, the resources mostly available for constructing identity are verbal resources. This is because there is a limited access to visual or auditory features such as appearance and accent, which are important identity that creates resources in face-to-face interactions. Therefore, IRC is an 'ideal' situation in which people can easily study the construction of identity through verbal communication in a daily life. Therefore, this paper focuses on the analysis of a language identity appearing on the behavior of online chatters in the 'Second Life' contexts (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). However, this was scoped by IRC, and the type of chat room visited was chosen based on the topic of chatting. So, the aim of this research is to discover how participants use verbal resources to construct and maintain an identity in IRC chatrooms, and how this fits into the framework of social-constructivism.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Internet Relay Chat**

Since the introduction and consequent booming of the Internet as well as the emergence of different electronic communication channels, we have been witnessing an enormous increase in computer-mediated communication (CMC) such as asynchronous (e.g., email) and synchronous CMC (e.g., IRC) (Tainyi et al., 2010). Saini (2014) maintains a feeling analogous to a spoken conversation that can be created, distinguishing chatting rooms from other text-based online communication gadgets such as Internet forums and emails. Thus, IRC can be a new linguistic genre which has developed over the last two decades. On IRC, a "synchronous textual dialogue takes place between spatially distant interlocutors" (Werry, 1996). In addition, it is characterized by the lack of physical proximity between speakers, visual and auditory contact, and non-verbal or paralinguistic

signals (Hentschel, 1998; Reid, 1991; Werry, 1996; Bechar-Israeli, 1995). All interaction is done via a typed medium and text is limited to about four or five lines per sequence. Physical contact between users is not assumed (Reid, 1991, p.8). The only information provided by the user on IRC is the one which users wish to provide, whether a fact or fiction, in comparison to real life interaction where some information about 'self' is unintentionally revealed through attributes such as physical appearance or accents (Bechar-Israeli, 1995). Given its potential advantages, its purported disadvantages, and the relatively rare research on IRC, there is a need to learn more about its potential uses (Yarosz & Fountain, 2005).

## 2.2 Previous Research into Identity

Goffman (1990), in his earlier days, conceptualized a new idea of identity construction in his work on human interaction using metaphors borrowed from dramaturgy. He analyzed interpersonal interaction and how individuals 'perform' in order to project a desirable image, using the theatre to illustrate individuals' contrasting *front stage* and *back stage* behavior (Goffman, 1990). Arundale (2010) argues that Goffman's work, being several decades old, is now outmoded and should be remodeled to incorporate progress in research and technology. However, Miller (2012, as cited in Bullingham and Vasconcelos, 2013) explains that electronic interaction is a natural extension to what Goffman posited. Online participants can have a chance to perform and present different identities in online environment. During online interaction, the 'Self' of participants is divided into '*the splitting aspects of the self*' (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) which are easily spotted in daily face-to-face interaction. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) posited that the 'Online Self' is a facet of a wider of identities, joining the self in other offline contexts. On the other hand, Vaast (2007) argues that it is a creation of 'New Selves' online. The online participants can easily mask their aspects of the offline self since being physically detached distantly between themselves and additionally may confuse their online identities being distanced from reality. Baker (2009) suggests an alternative perspective by introducing the concept of 'blended identity', in which the offline-self creates a new, online-self, and then the online-self informing the offline-self again through further interaction with those that was first met online. Also, research into identity portrayal on IRC was conducted by Bechar-Israeli (1995), Hentschel (1998), Reid (1991), Surratt (1998), and Werry (1996) in the past. Below are relevant aspects of their research briefly outlined, focusing on the methods of identity construction which have been identified. IRC users have created new conventions for creating and maintaining their identity in interaction. The followings are the main methods of identity construction identified in

previous research: nicknames, emoticons, actions and gestures, and graphic cues.

Nicknames (=nicks) are the names which IRC users create for themselves before joining a channel. They may be up to nine characters or so long. Nicks are the one constant feature of 'self' on IRC. However, this is attributed to the lack of physical presence which would provide a sense of continuity of identity in real life. As such, they play an important role in the creation and maintenance of 'self' on IRC. Participants may change their nicks at any stage of the interaction. Bechar-Israeli's research (1995) focuses on the presentation of 'self' using nicks. She states that on IRC, "Nicknames are ... the only initial way of saying who we are, in literally one word or expression" (Bechar-Israeli, 1995. p.2). She states that nicks become part of the personality and reputation of the IRC user, and that they are keys to making contacts and friends and to being recognized by others. "A nickname is an initial, and usually the only marker of people's self, or the self they are taking on" (Bechar-Israeli, 1995, p.23). Surratt (1998, p.66) also views the nick as "the key means through which identity is established", relating it to physical appearance in face-to-face interaction.

An emoticon is a type of 'shorthand' for the physical condition (Reid, 1991, p.15). It denotes an emotion and an expression such as pleasure, sadness, or sarcasm. These are parts of identity which are usually denoted by physical features or tone of voice in face-to-face interaction. In particular, Huffaker and Calvert's (2005) study implied that individuals at least feel the need to express some of their emotions with short symbols rather than text in weblogs and other chat devices (Tainyi et al., 2010). Therefore, the way in which people can imbue their messages with social meaning is through the use of emoticons (Walther & D'Addario, 2001). Emoticons are graphical representation of facial expressions which many IRC users embed in their messages. These symbols are widely used and are generally perceived among CMC users; they are described by most observers as a kind of replacement for non-verbal cues.

On IRC, actions and gestures are verbalized, symbolically enacted through language (Werry 1996, p.59-61). Thus, the convention for doing this is by placing asterisks before the action or by enclosing it in asterisks, as in the following examples taken from Werry (1996):

1) \*\*\* Action: Sofie passe un verre a tous et attend que les autres bots apportent le champagne...[\*\*\* Action: Sofie passes a glass to everyone and waits for the other bots to bring the champagne...]

2) <amya> \*hugs\* :)

Each verbalized gesture or action is a communicative act playing a role in creating an identity for the user. What's more, graphic cues are used in place of intonation and paralinguistic signals in verbal communication. Re-

duplicated letters represent expressive or drawn-out intonation. Periods and hyphens are used to create 'pauses' and indicate 'tempo'. Capitalization is used to represent shouting (Werry, 1996, p.56-57). Werry sees this phenomenon as an attempt to make the interaction as 'speech-like' as possible. However, Hentschel (1998) has shown that re-duplication occurring on IRC does not mirror phonetic realities of spoken language. IRC is a new linguistic genre not trying to imitate spoken language, but has developed its own methods of expression and communication.

### **2.3 Frameworks and Approaches to Identity Research**

Consequently, there are two main approaches to identity in the research which have been reviewed: the essentialist view and the social constructionist view. The essentialist view is that people have a unified personality, a coherent and consistent self, coming from some unique inner 'essence' (Burr, 1995, p.17-20). Bechar-Israeli seems to take this approach in her research. "Usually, they [users] prefer to keep the same nickname and identity, which for the most part is connected to a certain element in the real self which they may wish to exhibit" (Bechar-Israeli, 1995, p.24). As a result of this view, she sees the nick as "usually the only marker of self" and once the nick is decided, the identity of the user is also determined. The social-constructionist view of 'self' is that the 'self' is a product of social encounters and relationships. It is socially constructed through language, and we have a number of potential 'selves' which are not necessarily consistent with each other (Burr, 1995, p.26-30). Therefore, the identity which is created on IRC is just as valid as the identity that is lived out by participants with their families or at their workplace or in their school. Surratt's approach appears to adopt a framework very similar to social constructivism although she refers to it as the framework of symbolic interaction. "Symbolic interactionists assert that meaning emerges from consensus among actors and is established in interaction. ... The self is established by its activity and by the activity of others towards it. ... self is an outcome, not an antecedent of behavior" (Surratt, 1998, p.4-5). Furthermore, Surratt discusses the importance of cooperative processes for the maintenance of social order. The response of other participants plays a large role in determining how an identity develops and whether or not the identity portrayal will be successful. Thus, a nick does not create a stable identity in itself; it needs to be maintained in interaction. For this research project, the social constructionist approach to analysis was chosen because all interaction on IRC is verbal. Also, in social constructivism, identity is judged as being purely linguistically constructed.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1 Data Collection**

For this research, the program IRC was chosen (among several other IRC programs available) because it was the program easily obtainable on the web. Data was taken from the '#wheeloftime' chatroom. This chatroom is on 'gamesnet: random west US server', which is a server containing many channels (chatrooms) specializing in computer games. The '#wheeloftime' chatroom appears to be connected to a computer game by the same name related to a series of fantasy novels by 'Robert Jordan'. This chatroom was chosen as it appeared to have considerable interaction most nights and there seemed to be a regular set of participants as well. This was important because the identity of participants could be looked at over a period of a few days, not just a few minutes or hours. Logs of the interaction in this chatroom during about a one-hour period between 10-12 p.m. for seven nights over a two-week period were saved to a computer file for future reference and analysis. This provided over 30 page words or utterances which would be a more linguistically meaningful measure of data. From this data, only the interaction of three consecutive days (21 to 23 May, 2016) from '#wheeloftime' was selected for analysis due to time restrictions. However, for nick analysis, data was taken from all seven days of logged interaction because it provided a larger set of data but did not take a long time to collate. Due to the very nature of IRC itself, one cannot observe the IRC community unless one becomes a participant-observer. In order to observe the chatroom '#wheeloftime', I had to firstly join the channel and thus become 'visible' to all other participants as well. The potential influence of the observer on the interaction has been noted during this study, although it may also be the case that there is minimal impact on the interaction since the other users do not realize that the participant-observer is a researcher. During the logging sessions, something on IRC was typed if only it was addressed directly, which happened less than ten times. Therefore, influence on the interaction would hopefully have been minimal.

#### **3.2 Data Analysis**

In order to analyze the logged data, my focus was on the use of nicks, emoticons, actions and gestures, and graphic cues which had all occurred in previous literature, as well as topic choice and interpersonal strategies. These aspects were also discussed in relation to the concepts of fluid identity, co-construction, power and solidarity, and the sense of a continuous and coherent self. As with all research analyzing human interaction, care needs to be taken in commenting on what happens and what is meant in IRC dialogue because it involves an outsider surmising and inferring what is meant by the participants. What is assumed to be the intended meaning may be very

different to what was meant by the participants themselves. Things such as typos, coming in halfway through a conversation (which is always the case on IRC unless you enter a previously empty chatroom), and background knowledge of the participants provide complications. Just like all social interaction, interaction on IRC does not occur in isolation. It is influenced and guided by the social context of each participant, as well as the relationship history between the participants. Rice and Love (1987) maintains that media allow less social presence and create more psychological distance and, as a consequence, communication is likely to be described as less friendly, less emotional or impersonal, and more serious or task-oriented. IRC users do not hesitate to achieve socially oriented communication through it in spite of these limitations. In the following findings, assumptions have been made as to what is meant in the interaction. It should be pointed out that it will explicitly distinguish between those assumptions and actual observations. This is necessary due to the nature of language and communication, and is unavoidable in this type of research.

### 3.3 Findings

The logged data shows that all participants appear to have a basic nick which they use and this is vital for being recognized as a stable and continuous identity on IRC. However, participants often changed their own nicks during interaction (See Appendix for a list of nick changes found in the logged data). There appear to be two main types of nick change. One is in the form <nick:state>. This is commonly used to represent the participant's current emotional or physical state. For example, <Skippy> also used the nicks <Skippy:around> and <Skippy:suicide>. <Skippy:around> appears to be a play on words, but <Skippy:suicide> denotes a depressed state which Skippy explains as being due to assignments when questioned about it by <Chayla>. This type of nick change is usually accompanied by an explicit explanation by the participant in the interaction. For example, when <Fred> becomes <Fred:Movie>, it is accompanied with this explanation: 'watchin a movie/see yas all later'. As in this example, the <nick:state> convention often functions as an explanation of why one may be absent from interaction on the IRC channel as well, even if one's nick is still showing the list of nicks on the right-hand side of the screen. Therefore, the following sequence of nick changes is the most complicated example found. The example was so interesting that it was included in the research:

*\*\*\* Working Devil is now known as Kura:CUTBLT*



<Becaila> cutblt?!?!?

<Kura:CUTBLT> (Cleaning Up The Bloody Lunch Table – AFK  
AFK stands for ‘away from keyboard’. It is a commonly used acronym on IRC (from personal dialogue with regular IRC user) for some minutes now.

\* Becaila chikles at avi “he’s soooooo obsessed these days!” ;)

<Becaila> ahh, have fun kura

<Kura:CUTBLT> ^\_^

<Kura:CUTBLT> fun is not involved in that.. :(

<Kura:CUTBLT> ^o^

<Kura:CUTBLT> bbl

<Becaila> sure it is

<Becaila> it’s all about point of view :p

\*\*\* *Kura:CUTBLT is now known as Kura:CUTBLTAKAAFK*

\*\*\* *Kura:CUTBLTAKAAFK is now known as Kura:CUTBLT:AKA*

AKA probably stands for ‘also known as’ in this context: AFK

<Kura:CUTBLT|AKA|AFK> aaahhh... sweet :)

<Kura:CUTBLT|AKA|AFK> wjhe?

<Kura:CUTBLT|AKA|AFK> wtf??

\*\*\* *Kura:CUTBLT:AKA:AFK is now known as Kura:CUTBLT:aka:AFK*

<Kura:CUTBLT:aka:AFK> ah

<Kura:CUTBLT:aka:AFK>

\*\*\* *There’s a nick change protection on this server.*

<Kura:CUTBLT|aka:AFK> my my, never seen such a strict one before...

<Becaila> brb peoples

<Kura:CUTBLT:aka:AFK> okies, away now, later

This sequence reflects the freedom participants have to experiment with new names and new identities. However, in this situation, <Kura> is simply stating that s/he will be busy cleaning the table and therefore away from the keyboard. S/he could have simply stated it in ‘conversation’. Another determining factor for this choice may be that if <Kura> had entered the explanation as a statement, this would roll off the screen as more dialogue is entered and new participants are coming in. They would not see <Kura>’s statement, but the nick would still be displayed on the right side of the screen. Therefore, the transience of IRC interaction may play a large part in the use of a nick-change to describe the current physical state in this way, as an explanation for absence. The <nick:state> convention tends to be used to show something which the participant is doing or feeling in ‘real life’. This provides a sense of authenticity to the identity. There was also one example where the <nick:state> convention was used not as a form of nick, but in the form of a statement to explain the current state of a participant.

<Dreamwalker> DW: a\_bit\_busy

This reinforces the idea that the <nick:state> convention is used to



describe a state of being, as it is used in a similar way in interaction, not just in 'nick' forms. Another interesting aspect of nick usage is the use of two separate nicks by one participant at separate times. For example, one participant uses <Working Devil> and <Kura> as a nick at different times. From the data, no obvious reason for this change of nicks appears, although it seems likely that the participant must be wanting to portray involvement in some type of work by using the nick <Working Devil>. However, <Working Devil> is still referred to as 'Kura' by the other participants. The dual nick-usage does not seem to cause difficulties for recognition, perhaps because the nick change is often explicit in the interaction: Working Devil is now known as "Kura". However, in one case where there was a failure to recognize <Kura> when using the nick <Working Devil>, <Kura> revealed himself explicitly: <Working Devil>DW ~ Working Devil = Kura. This seems to show the importance of being able to be recognized and of having a stable, continuous identity on IRC. The use of the different nicks may be a sign of different identities belonging to one participant being developed on IRC, parallel to the identities people have in everyday life such as mother and teacher. The use of different nicks and nick changes does not seem to fit in with Bechar-Israeli's claim that users usually "prefer to keep the same nickname and identity, which for the most part is connected to a certain element in the real self which they may wish to exhibit" (Bechar-Israeli, 1995, p.24). One participant's nick change from <Fredrich> to <Freds\_Bimbo\_girl> (which interestingly involved an intermediate change to <Fred>, perhaps used to signal the pending change), became a gender role-play where the participant undertook to play a woman by giggling and raising her eyebrows and talking about dying her hair pink. This gender role-play was accepted by other participants who made comments such as "heya bimbo girl!" and welcomed <Fred> back when he reverted to his basic nick, acknowledging that his identity had changed, even to the extent that the 'real' <Fred> had been absent. No one addressed him as Fred during the time he was <Freds\_Bimbo\_girl>, unlike the situation where <Working Devil> was addressed as 'Kura'.

The cooperation of other participants reflects the co-construction of identity on IRC. Without the interaction of other participants with <Freds\_Bimbo\_girl>, the identity portrayal would not be successful. Similarly, when <Kura> uses the nick <Working Devil>, the way other participants still refer to him/her as <Kura> serves to give him/her a continuous identity despite the use of a completely different nick. We need to add the "participant clarification" provided by Rebecca (that Fred & F's BG are two different people). These nick changes reflect the fluidity of identity on IRC; however, it is clear that it is also important to have a continuous and recognizable identity in order to maintain relationships on IRC. Some

participants are regularly addressed by names other than their nick, such as <Master> being called ‘Tim’, and <Randomizer> being called ‘Kris’ or ‘Chris.’ This is a reasonably common feature and may suggest that some participants know each other in domains outside of IRC where they use different names.

Fourteen different emoticons were found to be used in the logged data. As has been mentioned in previous literature, these are used to express emotions which reinforce what is said, or to clarify the way in which a statement is to be taken, for example, whether it is ironic or not. However, another interesting feature of these which add to the identity being created by the participant is the frequency of use. The finding is that some participants use one type of emoticon more often than other emoticons and also more frequently than any other participant uses the same emoticon. For example, <Randomizer>’s frequent use of :P serves to present him as a cheeky or silly participant, especially when contrasted with other participants’ infrequent use of it. The same phenomenon occurs with <Kura>’s use of ^\_^ . Characteristic use of emoticons in this way creates a unique individual identity by marking oneself as different in relation to others. Also, emoticons are often used to respond to the statements of others – to show sympathy, to laugh at a joke, or to react to teasing. The use of emoticons reflects the high level of cooperation between participants and co-construction of identity that is necessary to successfully portray a particular identity.

<Marvin> oooh, more silly aussies

<TheRumTumTugger> hey?

<Dreamwalker> :P

Actions and gestures appear to be used in three main ways in the data. Firstly, they are used to show the manner in which something is said or to clarify the intended meaning, by showing a facial expression or describing the tone of voice. In the following example, the gesture emphasizes <Randomizer>’s disgruntled attitude over IQ test results.

*\* TheRumTumTugger just worked that out in time to feel like the biggest idiot.*

*\* Earendelf is still wondering why his head is still on his shoulders.*

*\* TheRumTumTugger just stops automatic response.*

Expressing something as an action rather than as an explicit statement can also add a sense of indirectness which softens the impact, seen in the following example where <Master> expresses something in an action form which could just as easily have been expressed as a statement.

*\* Master screams WAKE UP!!! WAKE UP!!!*

Shouting “WAKE UP!!! WAKE UP!!!” could have been taken as offensive by other participants, but as an action, it appears to be more indirect and means that <Master> can express what s/he wants to do without

threatening relationships with other participants. This may be a type of politeness strategy which has developed on IRC. This strategy provides participants with many possible ways of expressing themselves and provides the subtlety necessary for constructing a detailed and realistic identity on IRC. Actions and gestures play a large role in the co-construction of identity on IRC. They are very often used as a response to a comment or action by another participant, as shown in the following examples.

<Randomizer> beneficial for the slaves?

\* *Chayla nods*

<EvilBec> rl getting in the way as it does

<Dreamwalker> indeed, it does...

\* *Aan; ranting nods sadly. Aye.*

Actions can also add another dimension to a participant's identity through a role-play, such as in the following examples when Skippy acts as a kangaroo and TheRumTumTugger acts as a cat.

\* *Skippy|suicide curls up in DW's lap and sulks*

<Dreamwalker> awww, why sulking dear?

\* *TheRumTumTugger rubs against Akira's legs*

\* *Akira pets TheRumTumTugger*

\* *TheRumTumTugger hops in Akira's lap*

\* *Akira smiles and scratches him behind the ears*

\* *TheRumTumTugger purrs*

Here again, the cooperation of other participants is important for the success of these role-plays. For example, when Akira pets and scratches TheRumTumTugger, s/he is co-constructing TheRumTumTugger's identity as a cat. Without this cooperation, the portrayal of a cat identity would not be successful. These role-plays also create power and solidarity relationships between participants. In the above example, <Dreamwalker> portrays a nurturing identity by accepting <Skippy:suicide>'s action and by using the term 'dear'. This interaction between <Dreamwalker> and <Skippy: suicide> creates a power relationship with <Dreamwalker> in the position of authority; however, there is also a solidarity and intimacy created by these actions. Even the choice made by <Skippy: suicide> to curl up in <Dreamwalker>'s lap as opposed to the 'lap' of other participants causes an intimacy between these two which they do not have with other participants during this section of interaction. A similar phenomenon is seen occurring between <Akira> and <TheRumTumTugger> where <Akira> adopts the position of power and <TheRumTumTugger> is petted and scratched as a cat. Again, co-construction is evident, but these also reflect the fluidity of identity on IRC where human interactants can also adopt the identity of an animal and have this to be accepted by other participants as a normal feature of interaction. Although only a few examples of the graphic cues which were

mentioned in the literature were found in the data, one feature which was particularly apparent was some participants' characteristic use of punctuation. This has helped them create an individual identity in contrast to other people, and a parallel could perhaps be drawn to accent in spoken language. For example, <Aan`allein> always uses punctuation as it would be used in formal written language. This is a very distinct quality of <Aan`allein>'s language because punctuation, especially full stops, are seldom used on IRC unless it is vital to the meaning of an utterance. This is because most utterances often only consist of one clause or sentence anyway, and typing full stops at the end would be superfluous. However, <Aan`allein>'s use of 'correct' punctuation seems to give her/him a sense of authority and confidence. Below is one example of this. <Aan`allein> btw, does anyone else have the thought that LTT actually seems incredible as the typo is slightly ironic in the light of your interpretation of sane? He is not a stark raving lunatic, as we would expect from someone who had gone completely mad from the Taint. Rather, he behaved exactly as a sane person would do, who would suddenly appear in someone else's mind and realized his actions.

There are several examples in the data where participants describe their experiences and their history in order to create a continuous and coherent identity for themselves. On IRC, once something is typed, it becomes true because there is no other method of proving or disproving it.

<Randomizer> btw, I have a quote from WH saying that Flinn was far away from Demandred

<Randomizer> I'll have to dig it up somewhere

<Randomizer> I mentioned it here earlier

<Randomizer> but you weren't here

In the above example, <Randomizer> mentions something which s/he entered in the IRC discussion earlier when another participant was not on IRC. Due to the fact that a participant must be on IRC to see any of the interaction and also due to the transience of the interaction (unlike other written mediums, nothing on IRC is recorded unless a log is consciously made by a participant), this type of hearsay has developed to create a sense of continuity of identity and existence. Other participants have no idea of what other participants are doing when they themselves are not on IRC, and the joint interaction is very discontinuous and sporadic. Therefore, by mentioning previous IRC interactions, the participants are able to create the illusion of a continuous IRC identity. There are also frequent references made to other IRC participants who are not online at that time. This also creates the identity of those absent participants, as shown in the following example below:

<Aan: ranting> \*sighs\* i wish guy came back.

<EvilBec> where is he?

\*\*\* *Ryoga has joined #wheeloftime*

<EvilBec> heya ryoga

<Ryoga> örf

<Aan: ranting> Well, he's around, posts at FF and stuff, but he's not back in his ranting seat so far... :(

<Aan: ranting> yo Ryoga

<Ryoga> yo aan

<EvilBec> I haven't really seen many posts from him lately avi

<EvilBec> maybe 2 in the last few weeks

<Master> he was online a couple of days ago when i was online

\* *Dreamwalker nods - he's around a bit, but not heaps*

<Dreamwalker> work and stuff, you know

<EvilBec> yup

<EvilBec> rl getting in the way as it does

So even in "guy" 's absence, he gains an identity by being mentioned by other participants. The 'rl' typed by <EvilBec> in the above example refers to 'real life'. Although on IRC, people explicitly separate IRC interaction from 'real life' perhaps to create an illusion of IRC being 'unreal' in some ways. Hence, much of the interaction discusses aspects of the 'real life' of the participants, especially in narratives which occur. These narratives are generally very short, but still serve to build a background and a personal history, as well as a sense of authenticity for participants.

<Earendelf> started talking to a friend from school...and then started looking for a file for him...but have also been downloading the 2010 syllabus in case I get the tutoring job

<Earendelf> I spent all saturday debugging...and then asked my lecturer to have a look...and he puts in two quotation marks and the stupid thing works!

<Dreamwalker> if my mum were online, I'd ask her, but she went to bed a while ago

<Becaila> what have you been up to then rumtum?

<TheRumTumTugger> nothing much Uni, am talking to some my friends, well just one at the moment, you know the usual...oh, there was that assassination.

<Dreamwalker>'s interesting referral to his/her mother shows a fusing of 'real life' and 'IRC second life'. It seems to stand out as unusual, perhaps because it is not common to discuss one's family on the Internet. Although IRC is sometimes portrayed as a separate world (second life), almost like a fantasy world, like all other interaction it is not isolated. It is situated in a social, cultural and historical context, and all participants bring with them their experience and understanding of the world.

The choice of what topics to be discussed on IRC also plays an

important role in identity construction. The '#wheeloftime' chatroom is related to a website that is related to a series of fantasy novels, which has also been developed into a computer. Many nicks are also taken from characters in the novels or are variations on the names. <Becaila> is a character in the novels and <Randomizer> seems to be a variation on 'Rand' which is another character from the novels. Due to a lack of knowledge on my part of the fantasy novels, this cannot be dealt with in depth in this research. However, in the May 21 '#wheeloftime' log, there was a discussion about theories of characters in the novels. There were also frequent references to postings on the '#wheeloftime' Internet forums. This topic choice clearly presents the participants involved in it as readers of these fantasy novels. Participants often tend to discuss issues relating to gender and nationality, and highlight differences between themselves in terms of gender and nationality. Since identity can only exist in relation to contrasting identities, these are important areas where participants can present themselves as members of a certain group, in contrast to another group. Discourse about nationality in particular occurs repeatedly in the logged data. The following are several examples of this.

\*\*\* *Dreamwalker has joined '#wheeloftime'*

<Marvin> oooh, more silly aussies

<TheRumTumTugger> hey?

<Dreamwalker> :P

<Dreamwalker> I'm not silly

<rille> it's an invasion I tell you

<Marvin> := Aussie(x) -> Silly(x)

<Randomizer> if we got rid of all the aussies, I'd worry

<Randomizer> and the americans

<Skippy:suicide> yeah.. and the Dutchies

<Randomizer> :)

<Dreamwalker> and the swedes...

<rille> 5 evil aussies

\*\*\* *Vern is now known as berabera*

\* TheRumTumTugger worked that out just in time to feel like the biggest idiot

<Dreamwalker> hey rille, hey Tristan, hey vern

<Dreamwalker> aussies aren't evil!

<rille> yo DW

<Skippy:suicide> no, just silly

<rille> yes, and aussies are trying to invade this channel ;)

<TheRumTumTugger> i hope that isn't what you are planning to do, skip

<Dreamwalker> not silly...not we girls, anyway...

Interpersonal strategies are very important in the construction of

relationships and identity. Every choice made by the participants constructs identity. The choice of whether or not to acknowledge a particular participant is the most straightforward choice available. When a participant enters into a channel, their entry is announced in the following way: \*\*\* Dreamwalker has joined '#wheeloftime'. On entry, they are usually greeted with hugs or by statements of greeting. Waves are frequently used when a participant leaves a chatroom. This creates solidarity and friendliness between participants. If someone enters the chatroom and is not acknowledged, it is difficult for them to create a successful identity. Participants can ignore others on IRC without any physical or immediate social effects because of the distance between participants. The use of actions and emoticons as responses to other participants also function in this way to create and maintain relationships and to acknowledge the existence of other participants. The simple acknowledgement of existence is the most basic but the important aspect of the co-construction of identity as well.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the research, it has been shown that participants in IRC chatrooms use various types of strategies for creating and maintaining identity online. These include the use of nicks, emoticons, actions and gestures, graphic cues, topic choice, and interpersonal strategies. In order for these to be successful as identity creation strategies, they should be accepted by other participants. A nick change may be accepted as a new 'identity' or acknowledged as being the same participant. Emoticons and actions are often used as a response to other participants, to accept a joke or as a come-back to a taunt or a sarcastic remark. Narrative must be accepted by other participants as well. Additionally, interpersonal strategies can be used to support or to disallow certain identities. The extreme example is the choice to ignore a participant's existence. Power and solidarity relationships can also be seen on IRC and these necessarily involve interaction between participants to be successful. These points are all related to the concept that identity is co-constructed and cannot exist in isolation, which is a key issue in the social constructionist framework.

The idea that identity is a product of social encounters and relationships and that we have a number of potential selves, which are not necessarily consistent with each other, is another key aspect of social constructivism. This is evident on IRC where there are many examples of a fluid self, such as when participants act as animals in role-playing sequences or when nicks are changed either completely or to show a change in the state of being of a participant. Thus, the idea of a fluid self does not conform to the essentialist view of a unified and coherent identity. Due to the fluid nature of identity, strategies must also be employed to create the illusion of a



coherent and continuous identity in order to maintain relationships. This can be seen on IRC through the use of narrative, and reference to the ‘real life’ activities and relationships of participants. It has been shown that on IRC, there may be many strategies for creating and maintaining identity. This contradicts Bechar-Israeli’s view that the nick is “usually the only marker of self” and once the nick is decided upon, the identity of the user is also determined. The identity of a participant must be maintained in interaction by the participants themselves and also through the cooperation of other participants. Therefore, it is clear that identity portrayal on IRC can be accurately discussed and represented using the social constructionist framework.

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