

**Hacking the Collective Protagonist:**  
an analysis of characters and dispersed identity  
construction in *Watch Dogs: Legion*



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## Abstract

This Master thesis shows an analysis of the character recruitment system of Ubisoft's action-adventure game *Watch Dogs: Legion* that was released in 2020. By implementing a mixture of textual analysis, cooperative play, free play and elements of an autoethnography, I analyze the role that the availability of millions of potential player-characters and the team mechanics build into this game have on the construction and meaning of identity. Using concepts from the discourse surrounding character engagement and identity, such as Murray Smith's book *Engaging Characters* and James Paul Gee's identity types, I argue that this game should not be approached as featuring individual characters and that the player identifies with a collective instead. This game is built upon the idea of constructing a team. This shows through in the games' mechanics, its narrative, its directions and its dialogue. While it may seem like a player's identity is constructed and dispersed among a group of characters, I argue instead that identity in this game is one constructed through the creation of a collective unity of characters through which a player's identity is not dispersed at all but, in the true fashion of a hacker collective, tied together to create a collective protagonist. This thus means that within the existing discourse on identity construction, it does not have to mean that such an experience of identity construction only exists when it is focused on an identity constructed through an individual character. Instead, those same concepts could be extended upon by including an individual team of characters as a potential source of identity instead of solely focusing on individuals or a game's systems.

**Keywords:** *Watch Dogs: Legion*, character engagement, characters, identity construction, virtual identity, real-life identity, projective identity, hybrid identity, the collective.

## Introduction

The game *Watch Dogs: Legion* (Ubisoft, 2020), or *WD: L*, introduces itself with the claim “Play as anyone.”<sup>1</sup> It can be found in the game trailers, on the box of the game itself and even the Ubisoft website states that “every Londoner has a reason to fight back. They all have their own story, personalities and unique experiences, so choose wisely.”<sup>2</sup> In *Watch Dogs: Legion*’s futuristic version of London everyone could be a potential recruit for the resistance. The group of construction workers standing near the Tower Bridge, a group of hipsters, an ex-spy, or even the old lady you pass as you cross the street. In this world everyone single citizen is willing to join you guns blazing on a mission to save the city, all you have to do hack into their personal profile and ask.

So, based on these claims made by Ubisoft, *Watch Dogs: Legion* seems to market itself as a revolutionary new take on player engagement, implementing a system in which every single character in the gameworld has the potential to be recruited by the player as a playable character.<sup>3</sup> This thus means that there is no singular main character in the sandbox world of the game, instead the story is told through a team of recruits. This, of course, raises questions. Placing this game in the academic debate surrounding identity, issues about how players build an identity within this story come to light. What happens to your identity construction through the characters in a game like *Watch Dogs: Legion*, when it is dispersed among an almost endless amount of possible player characters? Will you be able to construct an identity through the characters in this story? Or does playing a game where you can be anyone at all inevitably result in playing no one?

The notion of dispersing a narrative, and thus your identity, over multiple characters is not new in games. Similar systems are also present in games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (Rockstar North, 2013) which has you play as three different characters with their own stories. On the complete other end of the spectrum there are also games like *Everything* (David O’Reilly, 2017) that allow the player to play, as the title suggests, as every object imaginable.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, in games like *The Sims 4* (Maxis, 2014) you also play with multiple different characters, though not through their eyes but instead as an omnipresent entity managing their lives. I would argue that *WD: L*, or more specifically its character mechanics, could be placed somewhere in between these games.<sup>5</sup> *WD: L*’s recruitment system contains millions of playable characters and allows the player to choose 45 of them to be part of the narrative experience.<sup>6</sup> When compared to *GTA V*, *WD: L* spreads the experience of the game over those millions of playable characters instead of playing as three of them. This might seem more similar to a system like *Everything* but it does not go as far as allowing the player to be as free as *Everything* does either, as it does not allow the player to play as inanimate objects. While playing *WD: L* the player is also still close to the characters they control, there is no godlike presence like in *The Sims 4* which in my opinion places this game somewhere in between.

The sheer size of the teams over which the player would disperse their identity in *WD: L* pushes against the boundaries of what playing as a character means, which also makes it such an interesting addition to debates about identity construction and characters. The debates about

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<sup>1</sup> Ubisoft Toronto (2020). *Watch Dogs: Legion* [Xbox One]. Ubisoft.

<sup>2</sup> Watchdogs Legion, “Play as Anyone,” Ubisoft, last visited on January 11, 2021. <https://www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/watch-dogs/legion/game-info/play-as-anyone>

<sup>3</sup> Watchdogs Legion, “Play as Anyone,” Ubisoft, last visited on January 11, 2021. <https://www.ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/watch-dogs/legion/game-info/play-as-anyone>

<sup>4</sup> David O’Reilly (2017). *Everything* [Windows 10]. Double Fine Productions. ; Rockstar North (2013). *Grand Theft Auto V* [Xbox One]. Rockstar Games.

<sup>5</sup> Maxis (2014). *The Sims 4* [Windows 10]. Electronic Arts.

<sup>6</sup> Chiam Gatenberg, “Watch Dogs: Legion has millions of playable characters, but most feel the same,” The Verge, uploaded on July 12, 2020. <https://www.theverge.com/2020/7/12/21319047/watch-dogs-legion-ubisoft-hands-on-preview-hacking-open-world-london-gameplay>

identity within Game Studies are often focused on a singular character to identify with. This can for example be recognized in the work by James Paul Gee and Kelly Boudreau, which I will elaborate on later.<sup>7</sup> Placing *WD: L*, a game focused on playing out a narrative as a large collective of characters, in this debate raises questions about what these processes of identity construction mean in a game with such a large cast of potential player characters. This adds a new example as well as a critical take on the existing discourse.

This thesis focuses on the friction between wanting to construct an identity with a character and having to disperse that identity over an endless group of them. By implementing textual analysis and play as a method as well as using concepts such as character engagement explained by Murray Smith and the hybrid-identity by Kelly Boudreau, I will try to answer the following research question: “What does *Watch Dogs: Legion’s* character recruitment mean for the construction and perception of identity in the context of this game?”<sup>8</sup>

In order to get a good grasp of both the recruitment system in *WD: L* and the role it plays in regard to identity, this research will be divided up into multiple sub-questions focused on different aspects of the game. The first sub-question will be “How are the different types of characters recognizable according to Smith and Lankoski’s perception of the concept?” With this question I will try to get a general understanding of what the characters in the recruitment system are like. Looking at the different qualities characters possess and how their identities are presented to the player. This helps with moving towards a good overview of how identity could potentially be experienced. The second sub-question will be “What role does the choice of character play during the gameplay of *Watch Dogs: Legion?*” This question functions as a direct follow up of the last sub-question. It focuses on how choosing the characters for your team could shape missions and gameplay and if that choice also plays a role in shaping the player’s identification experience in the game through for example dialogue and actions. After shaping a general overview of the characters within the game, the third sub-question will be focused on analyzing the perception of the character through gameplay. I will answer the question “With all these systems in place, what does the concept identity mean within the boundaries of *Watch Dogs: Legion?*” This last question functions as a reflection on the role of identity in the context of *Watch Dogs: Legion* and discusses what identity means in a game in which you play as a group and, potentially, what that identification with a collective means in the context of the game itself. For this question I will look at how the recruitment system functions during the game, as well as the player’s perception of the characters that are part of this world both through the lens of the game’s mechanics and the general context of its hacker narrative.

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<sup>7</sup> James Paul Gee, “Learning and Identity: What does it mean to be a Half-Elf,” in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2003), 51-72. ; Kelly Boudreau, “Between Play and Design: The Emergence of Hybrid-Identity in Single-Player Videogames,” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Montreal, Department of Sociology and Anthropology (2012): 13-352.

<sup>8</sup> James Paul Gee, “Learning and Identity: What does it mean to be a Half-Elf,” in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2003), 51-72. ; Kelly Boudreau, “Between Play and Design: The Emergence of Hybrid-Identity in Single-Player Videogames,” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Montreal, Department of Sociology and Anthropology (2012): 13-352.

## Theoretical framework

### Recognizing characters

This analysis of *Watch Dogs: Legion* is focused on finding answers to what it means to construct an identity when you play as a large team of characters. The first step towards finding answers to such questions is establishing how these characters could be perceived. After all, they are the very basis through which the player interacts with the world.

The film scholar Murray Smith describes characters as a fictional analogue of a human agent in his book *Engaging Characters*.<sup>9</sup> This is in line with what narrative theory agrees on. As Fotis Jannidis mentions, it is a longstanding notion that characters have been regarded as fictive people. To understand characters, readers tend to resort to their knowledge about real people.<sup>10</sup> While discussing characters in relation to media such as film or games, this interpretation of the concept helps to gain a general understanding of what characters in media could be perceived as.

Aside from being seen as human agents, characters can also be perceived differently based on their complexity. In narrative theory a distinction is made between flat and round characters.<sup>11</sup> Characters found in games can be described based on their depth and shallowness, which coincides with the narratological approach to categories, but also on their malleability and potential for player control.<sup>12</sup> Espen Aarseth categorizes three different kinds of characters: Firstly, Bots that have no individual identity. Secondly, shallow characters that have a name and distinct appearance but little personality. Similarly to flat characters, they are constructed around a single idea or quality. They stay the same no matter what happens to them. Lastly, deep characters who similarly to round characters change and develop as a story progresses.<sup>13</sup>

Keeping these descriptions of characters in mind, let us continue to broaden our understanding of them by discussing how they are perceived by the player through engagement. For this the work by Murray Smith is a good starting point. He distinguishes between acentral imaginative processes and central phenomena when formulating a theory of character engagement.<sup>14</sup> Of the two the acentral process works best within the context of this research, as the central process lays an emphasis on truly embodying emotions of characters.<sup>15</sup> This is something that is perhaps too much to ask from a game like *WD: L* due to its focus on switching between many different types of characters. While some players might feel a connection to the characters they see on screen and agree with their actions and motives, truly adopting the emotions you perceive on screen is hard in this case due to the fact that a player spends little time focusing on the individual emotions and motivations of every character on their team and more on the goals they try to achieve together.

Smith describes the sympathetic process as consisting of three elements: alignment, allegiance and recognition.<sup>16</sup> Of these three elements recognition is the most interesting one to discuss in regard to *Watch Dogs: Legion*. Smith states that recognition has received less attention

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<sup>9</sup> Murray Smith, "The Saliency of Character," in *Engaging Characters: Fiction, emotion and the cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 17.

<sup>10</sup> Fotis Jannidis, "Character," Paragraph 8, in *the Living Handbook of Narratology*, edited by Peter Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University), last visited on April 21, 2021. <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/character>

<sup>11</sup> Jannidis, "Character," paragraph 28.

<sup>12</sup> Espen Aarseth, "A narrative theory of games," *Proceedings of the International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games* (2012): 132

<sup>13</sup> Aarseth, "A narrative theory of games," 132.

<sup>14</sup> Murray Smith, "Engaging Characters," in *Engaging Characters: Fiction, emotion and the cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 81.

<sup>15</sup> Smith, "Engaging characters," 97-98.

<sup>16</sup> Smith, "Engaging characters," 83.

than any other level of engagement in studies concerned with character and identification, because of the assumption it happens automatically. He describes the concept as the way spectators perceive and recognize characters and their textual elements present in their text of origin.<sup>17</sup> Smith states that while we understand that characters are artifices, and are no more than collections of inert, textually described traits, we assume that these traits correspond to analogical ones we find in persons in the real world.<sup>18</sup> When looking at the millions of characters that are part of *WD: L*, one could wonder if they are essentially no more than collections of ascribed traits that went through a randomizing program and came to exist in your playthrough. Which is something that scholars like James Newman and Jonas Linderoth discuss when they describe video game characters as tools and equipment, which is something that this framework will reflect on later.<sup>19</sup> Alternately, Murray's interpretation of our connection to characters might also shine through in *WD: L* resulting in the experience that, no matter the number of characters, players could recognize attributes of people we find in the real world in the digital ones. Allowing the characters to be more than objects of randomized code on the screen.

Smith states that recognition depends on how the character is presented. One of the topics he discusses for this are external features such as a character's body, face and voice, their proper and titular names, how other characters react to the character and how they are described by others.<sup>20</sup> These aspects are also recognizable in games, but Smith's thirty-year-old observations might do well to be expanded on with the use of Petri Lankoski's article "Player Character Engagement in Computer Games."<sup>21</sup> When discussing recognition, Lankoski elaborates on the techniques used to recognize player characters by adding a gaming context to Smith's description of the external features of a character. Lankoski has rewritten and reinterpreted some of Smith's interpretations of external features from the point of view of a player in a video game. Firstly, Lankoski describes goals of the player character. These describe the plausible actions for players if they want to progress in a game and imply the motivations of the character. Secondly, he adds possible and impossible actions of a character. These describe the choices that have been made available when playing a character and their reasonability. Thirdly, he adds predefined functions of a player which describe the procedures that are triggered by an event in the game or by the choices of the player such as pre-designed dialogue, movement style, gestures and facial expressions. Lastly, he adds cutscenes.<sup>22</sup> This addition broadens our understanding of how recognition works in a game from external things like the name and looks of the character to also including more mechanical aspects that are build into the game. Including these features means that a character's special abilities in *WD: L* such as being able to hack faster or being in possession of a firearm, can now also be included in their external features that help build their personality and make them recognizable as individual characters to the player.

### **The character as a person**

Once these player characters are recognized by the player, one could wonder what happens when they try to connect with them. Are the characters simply a collection of characteristics or are they a true fictional analogue to a human agent that allows us to connect to a fictional world? This is where a discussion of identity comes in. In this framework I will make a distinction between three possible

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<sup>17</sup> Smith, "Engaging characters," 82.

<sup>18</sup> Smith, "Engaging Characters," 82.

<sup>19</sup> James Newman, "The myth of the ergodic videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames," *Game studies* 2.1 (2002).; Jonas Linderoth, "Animated Game Pieces," *Aesthetics of Play Conference Proceedings* (2005).

<sup>20</sup> Smith, "Engaging Characters," 114-117.

<sup>21</sup> Petri Lankoski, "Player Character Engagement in Computer Games," *Games and Culture* 6.4 (July 2011): 291–311.

<sup>22</sup> Lankoski, "Player Character Engagement in Computer Games," 300.

ways in which academic literature substantiates that characters, once recognized, could be perceived in relation to identity. The first being as a person with a personal connection to the player, the second being as something omnipresent and lastly as tools with a strong sense of interchangeability. Let us start with discussing the idea of constructing an identity based on the idea that a character is a person.

Viewing the characters in *Watch Dogs: Legion* as people to build an identity with, means that the player accepts the idea that there is a connection between them and the virtual world on screen. As will become apparent in this chapter, many of the scholars discussing identity do it from a role-playing point of view in which the player plays as a single character that they designed. Instead *WD: L* is more scripted and has a team at its helm instead of a single character that is created and controlled by the player. While the player has less input when it comes to the dialogue from characters and the way the narrative unfolds than there would be if the game were centered around role-playing, that does not mean that there is no room at all for identities. Any of the player's action in a game give them the opportunity to show identity through their actions, even if there is no optional dialogue to show it through.

While taking this view of identity in connection to *WD: L* into account, let us look at one way to interpret the connection between a player and the characters they portray in these virtual worlds. James Paul Gee offers one way to understand what identities in a game could look like in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. As the title suggests, the book is mainly focused on the role games play in a more educational environment. It does, however, supply us with a typology of identities that take shape through the activity of play that applies to more than just the educational environment.<sup>23</sup> Gee states that there are three identities when playing a game, namely the virtual, real-life and projective identity.<sup>24</sup> These identities are present within both the virtual world of the game and the "real world." Gee explains that the virtual identity is that of the character living in the world of the game.<sup>25</sup> So, the characters within the gameworld as they are created by the developers or the player themselves. The real-life identity is explained as the 'real' identity of the player. The identity of the person holding the controller.<sup>26</sup> This concept could come with a sidenote though. As stated in a reaction to Gee's typology, Zach Waggoner proposes to change the term "real-world" to "non-virtual."<sup>27</sup> According to Waggoner the term "non-virtual" would create a continuum that focuses on the technological and physical differences between virtual and non-virtual identities instead of focusing on the authenticity of the experience or its "realness."<sup>28</sup> While I would argue that the types of identities Gee proposes are not necessarily focused on finding out which experience is the most authentic, taking a closer look at what the wording of a term could mean for the interpretation of an experience should always be taken into account as it adds nuance to a framework.

The last type that Gee discusses is the projective identity. This is explained as the identity that we project onto a virtual character. It consists of the values and characteristics we want a character to possess and how we want them to portray those through their actions. It is the bridge between the real-world and virtual self.<sup>29</sup> It is what makes the connection between who we are in the virtual and

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<sup>23</sup> James Paul Gee, "Learning and Identity: What does it mean to be a Half-Elf" in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2003), 51-72.

<sup>24</sup> Gee, "Learning and Identity," 54-55.

<sup>25</sup> Gee, "Learning and Identity," 55.

<sup>26</sup> Gee, "Learning and Identity," 55.

<sup>27</sup> Zach Waggoner, "Virtual and Non-Virtual Identities: Connections and Terminological Implications," in *My avatar, my self: Identity in video role-playing games* (McFarland, 2009), 161-163.

<sup>28</sup> Waggoner, "Virtual and Non-Virtual Identities," 163.

<sup>29</sup> Gee, "Learning and Identity," 56.

non-virtual world. The projective identity can also be connected back to the concept of basis types from narratology. As Jannidis describes, the basis type can be explained as something that is connected to developmental psychology.<sup>30</sup> He states that from early on, humans distinguish between objects and sentient beings. Humans apply a theory of mind to beings which ascribes mental states such as intentions, wishes and beliefs to them. Once an entity in a storyworld is identified as a character, this framework is applied to that entity. The basis type thus provides us the basic outline of a character: there is an invisible “inside,” which is the source of all intentions and wishes. There is also a visible ‘outside’ which, similarly to Smith’s external features, can be perceived.<sup>31</sup> In the case of Gee’s role-playing characters, this invisible “inside” is partially projected onto them by the player. While a narrative gives a character goals and purpose, the player’s intentions are projected onto a character through how they control them. By projecting an identity onto them, the player helps to build the invisible “inside” of a character. The projective identity shows that the three types of identity mentioned by Gee do not exist separately from each other, rather they are always connected through interactions. The general experience of identity for the player takes shape through a process as the player is always present in every one of these identities at the same time.

Thus, by mentioning these three layers of identity, Gee offers the names of the identities that could be acknowledged while playing *WD: L* and how they interact with each other. I would argue that the identities Gee mentions here are applicable to many types of games. There is always a virtual and non-virtual identity present. Aside from that, by playing the game the player also projects what they want their character to be like through their actions. Even if there is no option to choose dialogue, there are many ways to project an identity on the characters in a game. Choosing to play *WD: L* by for example only using nonlethal weapons and hacking instead of going into missions guns blazing projects a player’s pacifist identity onto a character, without having to make a single choice in dialogue. Thus, Gee’s threefold of identities shows the process of play through which any type of identity can be projected onto a game.

These last views on identity interpret identity as a concrete concept that is clearly present between a player and a character. However, as *WD: L* is not a game with a very distinct player character at the helm, perhaps also taking a more hybrid concept of identity into account is useful within the context of this analysis. Kelly Boudreau discusses such an interpretation of identity in “Between Play and Design.”<sup>32</sup> In this text she introduces the concept of a hybrid-identity and proposes an analytical framework to deconstruct gameplay across genres to distinguish moments of identity emergence. She describes the hybrid-identity at its most basic level as an identity between the played avatar and the player, but that does not originate from or reside in either.<sup>33</sup> She states that this type of identity exists in a form that is sometimes, but not always, acknowledged by the player. When recognized by the player, it is often a sense that there is something more between themselves and the player-character than its role as a vehicle for their gameplay choices and more than the sum of its affordances designed into the game.<sup>34</sup> The concept of hybrid-identity could thus be seen as a fluid and almost fleeting form of identity that emerges during the process of playing a game. In that way it is similar to Gee’s projected identity, which also emerges through play but is mostly focused on the values a player projects onto a character.

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<sup>30</sup> Jannidis, “Character,” Paragraph 15.

<sup>31</sup> Jannidis, “Character,” Paragraph 15.

<sup>32</sup> Kelly Boudreau, “Between Play and Design: The Emergence of Hybrid-Identity in Single-Player Videogames,” Unpublished doctoral dissertation, *University of Montreal, Department of Sociology and Anthropology*, 2012.

<sup>33</sup> Boudreau, “Between Play and Design,” 84.

<sup>34</sup> Boudreau, “Between Play and Design,” 84.

Both Gee and Boudreau talk of an identity that emerges through actions and the process of play. Because of that, both Gee's typology and Boudreau's hybrid-identity apply to the analysis of *WD: L*. Even though the game does not allow for a lot of input during cutscenes, it does give the player agency in how they act outside of those moments. Leaving room for the creation of identities. Notions such as the hybrid-identity are especially applicable to this scripted world of *WD: L* as it does not offer the player all the tools to build their own identities in the world, but rather has them embody and switch between different already existing characters during a playthrough. This means that the identities felt could potentially be more fleeting as well.

### **The game as a character**

An important thing to note while discussing these texts on identity is that all of them focus on the attachment of a player to a single character in either a multiplayer online game or a single-player game. This is decidedly not the case in *WD: L*. So, while these views on identity are applicable to the game, our understanding can be broadened by adding a different take on connecting to a game. In the introduction of this thesis, I already compared *WD: L*'s mechanics to *The Sims 4*. The player holds the power to switch and choose between a great number of characters within *WD: L*, but the point of view in the game does have a player play *as* them instead of *with* them like in the *Sims* games. This continuous switching between characters does hold the potential to change the meaning of identification in a game like *WD: L* after a while though. A player might at first still connect with the characters in the game, but once they become focused on recruiting more and more characters instead of narrowing down their identity through one of them a more omnipresent take on identity could be more fitting within a world like *WD: L*. Ted Friedman discusses a similar process in "The Semiotics of SimCity."<sup>35</sup> In this article he talks about the player's role in SimCity and states that the structures of identification in this simulation game are more complex than simply assigning a role to the player. He suggests that a sense of omnipotence is more fitting than a narrowed down role in the game. According to Friedman, in a game like *SimCity* there is a constant shifting of identifications depending on what you are doing. Based on this he concludes that the player identifies with the simulation itself rather than its characters.<sup>36</sup> Adding this to the framework of identity in connection to *Watch Dogs: Legion* means that identity in a game with a fast and frequently changing cast of characters does not mean that we have to identify with them specifically, but that a process of identity construction could also be felt at a more omnipresent level.

Looking back at all of these descriptions of identity though, as I already briefly mentioned before, *WD: L* fits oddly within this discourse. While discussing the concept of identity scholars seem to shift their focus towards the relation between a single character and the player, as can be noticed in the descriptions written by Gee, Waggoner and Boudreau. When researching a sense of identity that shifts between characters views such as Friedman's come up. Positioning the player further away from the characters and having them identify with the systems of the game instead. Including such a view on identity construction thus broadens our understanding of the different ways in which a player could perceive themselves within the world of a game.

### **The character as a tool**

Lastly, while most of the scholars discussed in this theoretical framework have a positive view of identities, there are some who would disagree with the phenomenon of constructing an identity through a character. As I will be researching how *WD: L*'s recruitment system shapes the perception

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<sup>35</sup> Ted Friedman, "The Semiotics of SimCity." *First Monday* 4.4 (1999).  
<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/660/575?inline=1>

<sup>36</sup> Ted Friedman, "The Semiotics of SimCity." *First Monday* 4.4 (1999).  
<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/660/575?inline=1>

of identity, the idea that characters could only be perceived as a means to an end is important to consider within this theoretical framework. The number of characters that appear in this game, the ease with which a player can switch between them and the fact that they might appear to be very similar could all act as a factor through which a character might no longer appear as a person, but is instead perceived as a piece of equipment by the player.

A general description of characters with this functionality is given by Jonas Linderoth as he discusses the avatar. He describes them as having three different functionalities: roles, props and, most importantly for this thesis, tools.<sup>37</sup> When talking about tools, he states that characters could be perceived as a tool that extends the player's agency in the game activity. When the avatar becomes a tool for the player, the term 'I' refers to the player-avatar unit. So, the character is not an entity with characterhood but instead merely an extension of a player that acts out their tasks in a gameworld. According to Linderoth this is not a phenomenon that is unique to gaming, it occurs in other cases when our ability to act in a certain activity system is mediated by a tool.<sup>38</sup>

A more extreme take on both interactivity and ergodic experiences in games is written by James Newman in "The Myth of the Ergodic Videogame."<sup>39</sup> He states that videogames being an interactive medium is one of the most common misconceptions within game studies. He states that, while they might have interactive or ergodic elements, it is a mistake to consider that they present only one type of experience and foster only one type of engagement.<sup>40</sup> Essentially, Newman states that the very notion of the primary-player relating to a single character in the gameworld may be flawed. He argues that the player instead of perceiving the game through the eyes of one character, encounters the game by relating to everything in the world simultaneously.<sup>41</sup> He argues that characters in the gameworld should be seen as equipment that the player can utilize. They are vehicles. A means to an end. Newman explains that the player-character in the gameworld is reduced to their abilities when playing through a level. In an offline environment you could refer to your character as a he or a she, but while the player is actively playing the game these characters are reduced to their abilities.<sup>42</sup>

Both Linderoth and Newman thus bring the concepts of *equipment* and *tools* to use as an alternative way of viewing the experience of identity in *WD: L*, namely one that could potentially barely exist at all. It might seem like the articles by Newman and Linderoth directly oppose some of the theories that were mentioned before. While this is true, in regard to this research it is however important to show both sides of the debate. Including Newman's take on the functionalities of video game characters means that aside from showing the scholars that are pro-identity construction in most games, I also acknowledge the fact that this might not always be the case. Including the idea that characters sometimes simply turn into tools because of the context in which they are placed or the context in which the player plays the game adds nuance to my research. Showing that, if it were to be the case in *Watch Dogs: Legion*, identity construction is not an experience one will have in every game with playable avatars.

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<sup>37</sup> Jonas Linderoth, "Animated Game Pieces," *Aesthetics of Play Conference Proceedings* (2005).

<sup>38</sup> Jonas Linderoth, "Animated Game Pieces," *Aesthetics of Play Conference Proceedings* (2005).

<sup>39</sup> James Newman, "The myth of the ergodic videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames," *Game studies* 2.1 (2002).

<sup>40</sup> James Newman, "The myth of the ergodic videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames," *Game studies* 2.1 (2002).

<sup>41</sup> James Newman, "The myth of the ergodic videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames," *Game studies* 2.1 (2002).

<sup>42</sup> James Newman, "The myth of the ergodic videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames," *Game studies* 2.1 (2002).

## Method

This research is conducted by using a textual analysis of a game as explained by Clara Fernández-Vara in *an introduction to game analysis* as a basis.<sup>43</sup> Vara explains analyzing a game as applying a textual analysis to understand in which way a text, a game, would be understood by a player.<sup>44</sup> This means that I approach *Watch Dogs: Legion* as a text that can be understood by players in multiple different ways in regard to identity construction.

In addition to approaching the game as a text, I approach *WD: L* in a distinct way that is described by Jasper van Vught and René Glas in “Considering play: From method to analysis.”<sup>45</sup> I will be approaching *WD: L* as a ‘process’ as well as an ‘object’ as explained by Vught and Glas. Firstly, this means that I will focus on the formal elements of the game such as the presentation of the characters and how it approaches the player through text.<sup>46</sup> This is recognizable in the first half of my analysis through the use of sub-questions that are focused on the way characters are build into the game through their character profiles and the recruitment system. All of these elements are part of the formal elements of the game. Though, solely focusing on the formal elements is not enough to research a topic like identity construction. For this I also need to view the game as a ‘process.’ This means that I focus on the process of playing the game and how I experience it.<sup>47</sup> On the process side of this analysis are my personal experiences of identity construction that are included in the latter part of my analysis. These experiences can only become apparent when approaching the game as a process of play in addition to perceiving it as an object.

In order to gain insight into the experience of playing *Watch Dogs: Legions*, I will include two different playthroughs and strategies of play in the analysis.

Firstly, I will apply the strategy that Vught and Glas call ‘cooperative play.’<sup>48</sup> For my playthrough this means that I will play the main questline of the game as it was intended by Ubisoft. This makes me what Espen Aarseth would call the ‘implied player.’<sup>49</sup> Playing in this manner does not mean that I will only focus on the mechanics of the game. Playing cooperatively also allows me to focus on a variety of different components that make up a character, such as ludic and artistic elements and explicitly connect these components to how different kinds of characters are portrayed within the context of the game. As I want to meet as many characters as possible and get familiar with as many of the game’s systems as I can, focusing on the game’s main storyline is the best way to gather enough information to say something about identity construction within the context of the game. By playing through the game as the ‘implied player,’ I will follow up the pop ups that the game sends me such as actually switching between characters when they want me to, recruiting new characters that fit in the team and not straying away from the main questline. The information about the mechanics and general experience of the game that I obtain through this will help me gain a general idea of how character engagement is recognizable in *WD: L* and what these elements do with the perception of the characters as individuals. All of this will give me the chance to analyze the role of the characters within the game world and what place the player’s team of recruits has there, which is essential to answering my first two sub-questions.

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<sup>43</sup> Clara Fernández-Vara, *An introduction to game analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1-269.

<sup>44</sup> Clara Fernández-Vara, “The Whys and Wherefores of Game Analysis,” in *An Introduction to Game Analysis*, 11.

<sup>45</sup> Jasper van Vught and René Glas, “Considering play: from method to analysis,” *Transactions of the Digital Games Research Association Journal*, Vol. 4. 1 (2017), 1-19.

<sup>46</sup> Vught and Glas, “Considering Play,” 4.

<sup>47</sup> Vught and Glas, “Considering Play,” 4.

<sup>48</sup> Vught and Glas, “Considering Play,” 7-8.

<sup>49</sup> Espen Aarseth, “I fought the law: Transgressive play and the implied player,” *DiGRA: Situated Play Proceedings* (2007): 130-133.

After playing the game as it is “supposed to be played,” I will approach the game in a more experimental way. Applying the ‘free play’ approach as explained by Vught and Glas.<sup>50</sup> This means that I will try to apply transgressive strategies to my gameplay in order to see what the game feels like when stepping outside of its intended boundaries and rules. By playing cooperatively, I will only perceive the characters as the game wants me to perceive them. By incorporating free play, I will break free from these boundaries and get the opportunity to expose the possibilities of characters actually having identities in this world or being even more interchangeable than the ‘implied’ playthrough would make them out to be. The ‘free play’ playthrough will consist of me actively switching between characters during missions and straying away from questlines to follow characters around in the world according to the daily schedules that are provided by the game to see how their personalities are constructed and performed. This exposes the differences between characters and the experiences of playing as them when playing *WD: L* in ways not possible when solely playing cooperatively.

As I have already covered much of the game’s content in the cooperative playthrough, the corpus for the ‘free play’ playthrough can be narrowed down to limiting myself to a few hours of roaming the world of the game and messing with the systems that are part of some of the earlier quests in the main storyline instead of playing everything twice. This will allow me to gather alternative experiences that do not fall into repetition.

As I will be focusing on the process of the game and my experiences of identity during these playthroughs, taking note of my personal observations of the game is important to my research. This will be done by applying elements inspired by an autoethnography as explained by Leon Anderson to my research as a way to underline and include my personal experiences into the analysis of *Watch Dogs: Legion*.<sup>51</sup> Including these autoethnographic elements in my methodology allows me to actively record my findings, but also acknowledges the fact that the observations that are part of my analysis are subjective ones based on my personal experiences in the game. Anderson describes five key elements that are part of performing an analytical autoethnography.<sup>52</sup> However, as I will not actually be performing an autoethnography, I will only use a few of these elements to enhance my textual analysis of *WD: L*. The first feature I will include, and the most important one for my analysis, is narrative visibility of the researcher’s self. This means that a researcher is visible in the research by recounting their own experiences to help illustrate their analytical observations.<sup>53</sup> Thus, during my analysis I will use personal observations to help illustrate my arguments about *WD: L*. The second feature I will include is analytical reflexivity. This means that I will include a sense of self-conscious introspection while playing *WD: L*. I will include personal reflexive views of the self in my accounts of my playthroughs taking note of my own part within the game.<sup>54</sup>

Furthermore, in order to incorporate the autoethnographic elements into my analysis, I will produce fieldnotes in a manner described by Nicholas Wolfinger as ‘comprehensive note-taking.’<sup>55</sup> This means that I will comprehensively describe my experiences of the game and the characters I meet during every single playthrough of the game and include those in an appendix.<sup>56</sup> During my normal playthrough I will try to answer questions about the character’s special skills, how their behavior differs from the others on the team, if they can be placed in a specific category and how

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<sup>50</sup> Vught and Glas, “Considering Play,” 8-9.

<sup>51</sup> Leon Anderson, “Analytical Autoethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35.4 (2006): 375.

<sup>52</sup> Anderson, “Analytical Autoethnography,” 379.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, “Analytical Autoethnography,” 384

<sup>54</sup> Anderson, “Analytical Autoethnography,” 382-383.

<sup>55</sup> Nicholas Wolfinger, “On writing fieldnotes: collection strategies and background expectancies,” *Qualitative Research* 2.1 (2002): 90.

<sup>56</sup> Wolfinger, “On writing fieldnotes,” 90.

playing a mission as them felt for me. During my 'free play' playthrough I will record answers based on more general questions about the differences in dialogue between the player characters and what the routines of characters in the world are like. All of the answers to these questions will be recorded in a schema consisting of sum of general information from a character's profile and more detailed descriptions of a playthrough when I for example follow characters around.

## Analysis

### Playing as *anyone*

In pursuit of answering the question about what *Watch Dogs: Legion*'s character recruitment system does with the perception and experience of identity in the game, let us start this analysis by looking at the specific mechanics of the character system that is so essential to this gameworld and how the different types of characters are portrayed by it.

A player's first moments in the world of *Watch Dogs: Legion* start after an introductory story of a failed hacking heist in the houses of parliament of London. When the hacking organization DedSec falls, the player becomes one with its artificial intelligence system Bagley to choose the recruit that will revive it. Aside from being the player's introduction to the game, this process is also the player's first introduction to its recruitment and character system. Without even setting foot in the 'real' world of the game, a sense of character building has already begun. In these first minutes after completing the game's scripted prologue the player gets their first glance of the characters that live in this world. As becomes apparent, all characters in this game have a full name and backstory written in their character menu. Once they are found in the system by DedSec's Bagley, as is the case in the introduction, their skills and name will pop up alongside their job and their current activity. Later on in the game, this changes to the player scanning them with their phone as the player passes them. Once the player gains full access to a character as a team member, they get a clear overview of who they are. On the first screen their full name, their occupation and beneath that a short description of who they are as a person within this world are visible. This sentence often shows their views on Albion, one of the big bad corporations in this universe, and thus builds an overview of who is easier to recruit aside from building character. In boxes underneath this character information, the special abilities and items of the character are displayed. These completely depend on the character and their occupation. Hackers will for example have a quicker hack cooldown, while police officers have uniform access and construction workers possess a drone as their special ability. Alongside these special abilities some characters also have a specific weapon on them and might have a vehicle available to them. The number of boxes with abilities differ per character. Some might only have one ability and others may have three.

Later in the game another aspect of the character system becomes apparent. When playing as a character for a longer period of time a new list called "recent events" is added to their profile. This list shows a character's most recent interactions with others in the world, if they have been injured or arrested and by whom and why they chose to join DedSec. Alongside this system is another system that is added to the characters around them in London. Once a character has interacted with them, this will show up in a big green or red bar underneath their profile when the player scans them. Thus, aside from the characters you play as having a strict list of characteristics assigned to them, the player themselves also plays a role in creating a new list of experiences and characteristics for their team. Thus, as is confirmed by the game, actively shaping the characters they play as.

As the player is not yet familiar with the world and its mechanics, the first character you choose is in my experience partially based on their general appearance, special abilities and the general description given in their metadata. As it is the very beginning of the game, most of the characters on the list during the introduction only have one, often generic, special ability. For my cooperative playthrough I chose the character Kathleen Datt. She is described as a podcaster cited for fighting with Albion guards. I chose her based on the fact that she was assigned a special ability called Albion vendetta, which gives her extra faction damage.

*“I like the fact that she is described as a woman in her early twenties which I am as well. While I could choose a character with for example better hacking skills, my gut tells me to choose a character closer to who I am instead.”<sup>57</sup>*

As becomes clear in my fieldnotes, aside from choosing her based on skill I also recognized myself in her during the recruiting process. Which shows a direct connection between these characters and my personal identity construction being shaped through recognition.

This means that, in terms of both Smith and Lankoski’s views on characters, the characters of *WD: L* do come close to being recognizable based on their descriptions. All characters in this world already possess certain aspects of being recognizable. Most of the recognizable features of the characters appear through predefined functions that are triggered by events in the game and predetermined cutscenes.<sup>58</sup> For example, when speaking of Smith’s external features, most of them differ in voice and appearance thus making them stand out from each other. After recruiting them, it also becomes apparent that characters can possess very different personalities. While one character might swear a lot and be very pessimistic, another might be very joyful and optimistic about achieving goals in missions. When actively comparing the characters during free play, their different personalities also become clear when comparing their approaches to certain scenes. For example, switching between the construction worker Kate and the hacker Nicholas before entering a scripted scene showed a clear difference in their dialogue.

*“Switching between Nicholas and Kate shows me the difference between someone who does not like Bagley or any of the missions they have to perform, versus someone who jokes with Bagley and says things like “wow if only my mum could see me now.”<sup>59</sup>*

As can be seen in my fieldnotes, the dialogue of these characters changes when switching between them. The characters do not actually give a lot of their personal information through action and dialogue in cutscenes, but their personality and external features do show through. These elements presented by the game allow the player to construct the characters, which is essentially what Smith describes as recognition.<sup>60</sup>

In addition to more external features such as look and personality, the long lists of traits that are part of the characters’ metadata also appear during missions and cutscenes. The profiles show an elaborate list of characteristics that they possess. Ranging from salary, to a favorite pass time, to family. These characteristics are not only for show though, as becomes apparent when some characters gain the potential to be recruited immediately because of their relation to the recruits. For example, the construction worker character in my cooperative playthrough met her wife in a mission and was able to recruit her for DedSec. When I later checked the information in both of their profiles, as can be seen in my fieldnotes, it did indeed show that they are related to each other.<sup>61</sup> At a later point in the game the player also gets the chance to buy a tech upgrade that shows a recruitable character’s daily schedule. If the player chooses to follow the character around that day, as I chose to do when following the character Lachlan during my free play playthrough, they will indeed see that they have been programmed to follow that schedule and that the slivers of information about a character’s future actions that show up when scanning them with a phone are

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<sup>57</sup> Fieldnotes in the appendix, in the paragraph “Kathleen” on page 26.

<sup>58</sup> Lankoski, “Player Character Engagement in Computer Games,” 300.

<sup>59</sup> Fieldnotes in the appendix, in the paragraph “Switching between characters” on page 28.

<sup>60</sup> Smith, “Engaging characters,” 82-83.

<sup>61</sup> See “Choosing characters” on page 27 in my appendix for information on this encounter.

also an integrated aspect of their character.<sup>62</sup> So, while some of the sentences might appear to be randomly generated useless details that could be interpreted by the player as they see fit, some of the data is actually integrated into the world of the game. Thus, making them part of the physical world of the player-characters instead only being words on a screen.

Establishing the characters as having distinct personal profiles that allows the player to perceive them as recognizable human agents is only a small part of how characters in this world are portrayed though. Seeing these characters as individuals while reading their metadata or once they are part of your recruits does not mean that this is always the case. This becomes apparent during the recruitment quest "Reporting for duty."<sup>63</sup> This quest, focused on obtaining the first uniformed character for your team, exposes an aspect of the game that causes uniformed characters to appear almost interchangeable.

*"I conclude that they [these six construction workers] do not differ at that much and choose Kate based on the statement that she publishes tool review videos and that she looks like a nice character."*<sup>64</sup>

As can be seen in my fieldnotes, it appears that their abilities make these characters interchangeable with other characters of the same occupation. This also gives the player the idea that they should perhaps not have more than one character per character type on their team, because aside from some metadata, their dialogue and their looks, all the rest stays the same. This particular experience evokes some aspects of Newman's ideas of characters as equipment.<sup>65</sup> When seeing these characters right next to each other their interchangeability shines through. From an outsider's perspective before recruiting them, these characters are sold to the player as a handy construction worker instead of a full-fledged character. While it is possible to see the differences between the characters from both their looks and their very elaborate character profiles, which are indeed some of the components needed for character recognition as described by Murray Smith, being able to compare them so quickly to others around them does take away from their characterness.<sup>66</sup> Though from a different angle, while a situation like this pushes the toolness of a character to the foreground, it also pushes the player to make a choice based on their personal connection to a character. Instead of just being assigned a character, the player now gets the option to choose a character that they find to be the most compelling based on their looks and profile or one they feel would fit best within their team of recruits. Thus, a situation like this also activates a process of identity construction as it has the player seek out the character they like the best. One that has the player search for a connection between their virtual and non-virtual self to find a character they would like to embody during missions.

Based on these observations, one could state that the different types of characters in this world are portrayed through an elaborate profile of characteristics and varying personalities that show up in missions and cutscenes after recruiting them. Thus, while being a game filled with millions of playable characters, there is not necessarily a point to make about a character's interchangeability or toolness solely based on their character profile when looking at them individually. The combinations

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<sup>62</sup> See "following characters around" on page 28 in the appendix for a description of this in my free play playthrough.

<sup>63</sup> See the paragraph "Choosing Characters" in the appendix for a general overview of my recruitment of the character Kate.

<sup>64</sup> See "Choosing Characters" on page 27 in the appendix for the full quote.

<sup>65</sup> James Newman, "The myth of the ergodic videogame: Some thoughts on player-character relationships in videogames," *Game studies* 2.1 (2002).

<sup>66</sup> Smith, "Engaging characters," 82.

of appearance, personality and character information give the player the chance to obtain enough information and connection to a character for them to be portrayed as a real person or, as Smith describes it, a fictional analogue of a human agent.<sup>67</sup> The elaborate metadata and clear connections to others in the gameworld show also causes no direct need to assign a fictional identity to a character in order for them to feel like an engaging person on screen. Almost all characters also possess a daily schedule that the player can follow and look into, causing them to have a sense of personal life if the player would want to seek that out. Thus, giving them more of a sense of personhood than would seem likely once you read about the sheer number of characters and the constant change that is at the core of this game. Once recruited and thoroughly studied, a single character can appear as a separate person that is part of a team instead of an empty husk of data.

Though, this view on the characters in this world could be taken with a grain of salt. While the characters do indeed harbor the potential to be recognizable, the recruitment system in this game still has the potential to cause for a distinct sense of interchangeability that could be felt by the player from time to time. This is most noticeable when analyzing the uniformed characters in the game.

### **Playing together**

The previous chapter focused on single player characters and their relations to other characters in the world, though I would argue that viewing these characters solely as individuals is just a small part of the experience of constructing identity in this game. A player could view the characters in their team as individuals with their own motivations and backgrounds but by doing that they miss out on an important aspect that is woven into the fabric of this game, namely “the team.”

All the characters in this futuristic version of London have one thing in common, namely their connection to the internet. The recruitment mechanics in this game explicitly show that all of the characters are connected. While the literature and concepts that apply to identity construction could indeed be applied to a single player character, it feels like this is not all that the game asks of the player. Viewing them as individual entities is a good way of analyzing the specific differences between characters and how engaging they are, but it feels too superficial in regard to a discussion of identity construction within the context of this game. The characters in this world are designed to play *together*. Playing as anyone thus means playing as a team. There are countless references to teamwork and togetherness in this game. For example, Sabine, one of the most prominent non-player characters in this game, only addresses the characters as “team” and never by their full name. The same goes for the recruitment cutscenes in which recruits often state that the player “is DedSec.” The player characters are consequently never addressed as individuals after they become part of the team, instead in a true hacking collective fashion, they become a “we” and an “us.”<sup>68</sup>

First of all, these ‘identity claims’ such as “us” and “we,” which Leonard Dobusch and Dennis Schoeneborn describe as speech acts that concern what the social collective is or does, are incredibly similar to those used by large hacker groups in our non-virtual world.<sup>69</sup> As Dobusch and Schoeneborn mention, large hacker organizations, which DedSec is as well, try to accomplish a sense of collective identity through speech acts that aim to delineate what the entity or actor is or does.<sup>70</sup> They relate this to a sense of organizational identity, which they describe as the articulated claims emerging from interaction among the leaders, employees and other stakeholders of an organization that regard who

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<sup>67</sup> Smith, “The Saliency of Character,” 18.

<sup>68</sup> See “Playing as a team” on page 27 in the appendix for the fieldnotes describing my experience that led me to this conclusion.

<sup>69</sup> Leonhard Dobusch and Dennis Schoeneborn, “Fluidity, Identity, and Organizationality: The Communicative Constitution of Anonymity: Fluidity, Identity, and Organizationality,” *Journal of Management Studies* 52.8 (2015): 1005–35.

<sup>70</sup> Dobusch and Schoeneborn, “Fluidity, Identity, and Organizationality,” 1006.

they are as an organization.<sup>71</sup> One could thus state that through the use of these identity claims in the game's narrative, *WD: L* actively references a sense of organizational identity that is created through the way it addresses its characters. This also directly connects it to the practices of real hacker organizations.

Aside from that, the collective shows through in the media the characters carry with them. Every single person in this world carries a mobile phone with them that can be hacked into by the player and, coincidentally, is also used to track characters entering in and out of different districts in London. The player's protagonist group DedSec uses these pieces of technology as their main weapon, as most of the hacking and fighting with their robot spiders is done through the use of their phones during missions, but also as their main way of identifying each other. This exposes an interesting way to perceive the protagonist of this game. Instead of viewing the player-characters in *WD: L* as individually chosen characters, they can be seen as a collective of individuals. Because of the use of mobile phones as a main way of communication the collectivity in this game is similar to what Howard Rheingold describes as a 'smart mob.' He states that smart mobs consist of people who are able to act in concert even if they do not know each other. The people who make up those smart mobs cooperate in these ways because they carry devices that possess both communication and computing capabilities. These mobile devices connect them with other information devices in the environment as well as with other people's telephones.<sup>72</sup> At its core, this is exactly what the communities in *WD: L* are based on. The phones give the characters in this world the ability to gather a team of operatives and build their revolution. The very notion of the 'smart mob' is thus built into the mechanics of this game. Time and time again the quests and pop-ups in this game prompt the player to connect to others through their phone and create a collective.

Viewing the notion of playing as anyone through this lens of a collective built by mobile phones brings the idea of identity creation to a crossroad. It brings us back to the idea that *WD: L* falls in between games like *The Sims*, *GTA V* and *Everything*. On the one hand the game represents and builds their characters by giving them very distinct names, daily tasks in the world, elaborate backgrounds and keeping track of their relations to other characters. On the other hand, the game connects especially well with the idea of identifying with a collective. While it might depend on the player's experience with the characters, I have found that the player-character you choose in this game is not the very first character, your favorite character or the character you are playing at that moment, instead it is DedSec. The constant shifting between the characters leads to a feeling of interchangeability and a sense of dispersion that is ever present. This makes singling out a certain character as a player-character to construct an identity with not the complete answer to the question of with whom the player should construct an identity. Instead of building your very own Dark Elf like James Paul Gee wrote about in his analysis of identity, the player builds their very own DedSec.<sup>73</sup> The construction of identity is part of the process of creating a group to disperse it over. As became clear during my 'free play' of the game, the characters do indeed have a randomized and individual reaction to many scenes and quests.<sup>74</sup> Switching between them changes the experiences of the same scene slightly, but at their core these different characters shine at their brightest when imagining them as a team.

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<sup>71</sup> Dobusch and Schoeneborn, "Fluidity, Identity, and Organizationality," 1006.

<sup>72</sup> Howard Rheingold, "Introduction: How to Recognize the Future When It Lands on You," in *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution* (Basic Books, 2002), 12.

<sup>73</sup> James Paul Gee, "Learning and Identity: What does it mean to be a Half-Elf," in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (New York: St. Martins Press, 2003), 51-72.

<sup>74</sup> See "switching between characters" in the appendix for a short description of this encounter in my free play playthrough.

This also becomes visible when thinking about how character information is presented to the player in *WD: L*. The way in which this information is presented to the player can be recognized as part of the ‘melodramatic structure’ of alignment that Lankoski describes.<sup>75</sup> It appears that the information in this game is unfolded in a way that leads to the player knowing more than any of the player characters do. Because the player plays as multiple different characters in this world, they possess the ability to know more about the personal experiences and thoughts of any of their characters. Though, in the context of this world, any character could hack into the profile of any of the player’s characters and get to know just as much as they do about their salary and records as the player does. This places the knowledge of a character’s profile and experiences at an interesting point. As the player you play as every single character on your team and with that you learn the ins and outs of who they are and what they experience. However, as this world is shown through the lens of a hacker group, the knowledge that you gain from that is not very different from that which any of the other characters could obtain through hacking into the personal profiles of the people around them. This changes the ‘melodramatic structure’ with which the information in this game is presented to the player from one in which they are the only one to know everything, to one in which they player does not necessarily know more about a character’s personal thoughts and information but is the one who has the overview of what any of this information means for the entirety of the team. This places the player in a figurative role of a messenger running between the operatives to give them the essential knowledge to fulfill their tasks.

Bringing in the notion of the ‘hybrid identity’ is perhaps the easiest way to assign a sense of identity creation in this context of identifying with a team of characters. While, as stated, the player does play *as* the characters and not as a digital recruiter in this world, this means that assigning a hybrid identity to this situation would work the best. As Boudreau states, when a ‘hybrid identity’ is recognized by a player it is often a sense that there is more between themselves and the player-character than its role as a vehicle for their gameplay choices and more than the sum of its affordances designed in the game.<sup>76</sup> While playing *WD: L* this ‘hybrid identity’ is not related to a specific construction worker or a taxi driver, the ‘hybrid identity’ is felt through the connection the player feels to them when they all work together. A character is never truly alone in this world. They are always connected to the others on the team. They call each other while playing missions to give input, come together for a team meeting after a finished mission and are never addressed by their full name but instead identify as DedSec. A player-character once recruited gives up their identity to become the collective and that is exactly what is at the core of this game; working together and revolting against evil corporations and other hacker collectives. Because of that, the player identifies with a connection between characters and their goals, instead of the specific personalities assigned to every one of them.

One could of course wonder what this collective identity means for the position of the player within the game and their team of characters. In terms of Gee’s identity typology, projecting an identity on a group does not differ all that much from what he writes about projecting it on a single Dark Elf. Perceiving the team as harboring a collective identity with similar goals, means that they also harbor the potential to perform the player’s projective identity. After all, the choices that can be made at the end of some of the five villain questlines such as choosing to kill or spare a character but also all of the smaller choices such as choosing to complete a mission stealthily or through fighting are performed by the characters with the collective in mind. Since the characters are an “us” and a “we,” the identity that is projected by the player is projected on a collective as well. The values and characteristics we want a character to possess and how we want them to portray those through their

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<sup>75</sup> Lankoski, “Player Character Engagement in Computer Games,” 302.

<sup>76</sup> Boudreau, “Between Play and Design,” 84.

actions is spread out over a group, but are performed by the characters as a cohesive mass.<sup>77</sup> The player could choose to play as only one or two characters for most of the game, but even then they are never addressed as less than a legion of operatives.

All in all, one could argue that at first glance *WD: L* could appear to the player as a game full of characters that are completely interchangeable with each other. A world with millions of generated player characters could only lead to feelings of repetition. And it would indeed be like that if the player were to interact with hundreds of them. However, *WD: L* tries its best to steer away from this by implementing a sense of collectiveness into the game. As can be noticed later on in the game's narrative, even the storyline plays into team mechanics as recruits get kidnapped and arrested for the sake of the story. The team then has to face the consequences by for example becoming wanted in the city. So, while a large portion of the game could be played with a single character, not even the narrative of the game will allow the player to do so as it continuously forces you to recruit and switch between characters. Thus, interpreting *Watch Dogs: Legion's* protagonist as being DedSec instead is perhaps the best way to expose what the relation between the player and their player-character truly means in this game. There is no character builder to help you build a character that will perform your projective identity. Instead, the player builds their own team of recruits with characters that they deem fit to carry out their will. While it may seem like a player's identity is constructed and dispersed among a group of characters, I would argue instead that this smart mob of DedSec operatives is a collective unity through which a player's identity is not dispersed at all but tied together to create a collective protagonist.

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<sup>77</sup> Gee, "Learning and Identity," 56.

## Conclusion

As was stated in the introduction of this thesis, the notion of dispersing yourself among an endless cycle of characters made me imagine playthroughs featuring a loss of connection and characters that turned into vehicles once they died or once a new and better version came along.

Though, while playing the game, something completely different occurred to me. I expected to find myself approaching these characters as individual hubs of identity and imagined that I would somewhat agree with James Newman's views of characters as equipment or side with Ted Friedman's idea of connecting to a system instead of a character. Instead, I found that this game should not be approached as featuring individual characters at all. By distancing myself from the idea that identity could only be constructed through the direct connection between a single character and the player, which is recognizable in much of the discourse discussed in this research, I found that *WD: L* still harbors the core of the concepts of identity construction that Gee and Boudreau discuss while also straying away from the idea of connecting with individuals.

This game is built upon the idea of constructing a team. This shows through its mechanics, its narrative and its dialogue. If a game prompts the player to look for a team and play as such, its process of identity construction should be viewed similarly. As has been established while discussing the character engagement in *WD: L*, the characters do harbor enough elements to stand out as individuals that could be identified by the player as rounded characters without having to imagine the personal identity for them on their own. Though, looking at it from a single-character point of view only shows a small part of the identity a player could construct in this game. The player's view of the game is one not seen through the eyes of a single protagonist like Gee's, nor is it seen through an overarching system like Friedman would suggest. Instead, *WD: L* places itself somewhere in between existing discourse of identity construction by allowing the player to build teams themselves, but giving them characters with somewhat recognizable personalities. While it may seem like a player's identity is constructed and dispersed among a group of characters, I would argue instead that identity in this game is one constructed through the creation of a collective unity of characters through which a player's identity is not dispersed at all but, in the true fashion of a hacker collective, tied together to create a collective protagonist.

I would thus state that the concepts of identity construction proposed by the scholars in my theoretical framework could be extended upon by including collective protagonists like DedSec that fall in-between the existing ideas of individual identities or connecting to a game's systems. Accepting that a collective like DedSec could harbor the same sense of identity sheds a different light on existing concepts like personhood and identity construction as it makes us perceive it through the eyes of a group instead. It introduces possibilities for thinking about what these collective protagonists mean for the virtual self.

There are, however, also some limitations that could be looked into in future research. One of the most prominent aspects of this game I chose not to focus on is its permadeath system. The permadeath mode could change the perception of the game's characters and the player's identification with them completely. Once this system is implemented, all characters in the world of the game permanently disappear upon death. The identities a player constructs could disappear entirely, making the game an endless cycle of swapping between new characters. The idea of constructing an identity through a team might not even have come up because of the constant state of flux the player's team would have found itself in. Another interesting take on the game could be found by buying a special edition of the game with pre-assigned operatives. This changes the process of choosing recruits dramatically as the player already has a pre-assigned team with them. In terms of method, my choice to perform a textual analysis and parts of an autoethnography means that the observations made in this analysis are only based on my personal interpretation and experience of *WD: L*. This makes the conclusions of this analysis completely subjective to my own experience of the

game and thus means that they could differ per person. Future research could broaden these existing observations by applying parts of a discourse analysis or even some quantitative methods to see how others perceive identity in *WD: L*.

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## **Appendix: Fieldnotes**

### **Cooperative playthrough**

During my normal playthrough I recorded answers to questions about the character's special skills, how does their behavior differ from the others on the team, if they can be placed in a specific category and how playing a mission as them felt for me.

### **Some general remarks about the characters in this game**

Encountering characters during my cooperative playthrough is not hard. The streets of London are full of them. They all have assigned names and profiles and many of them are also open for recruitment. However, while playing the main questline I do not often decide to recruit any of the characters I encounter on the street as those missions tend to be a bit long and take me away from a lot of the main questline. That is why most of the characters on my team are obtained directly through liberating parts of London and missions that were part of the main questline. This means that my team is not even near maximum capacity as I approach the end of the game, but big enough to consist of a variety of different characters with different skillsets. All the characters on my team have a full name and backstory written in their character menu. Once I scan them with my phone as I walk around London, their skills and name will pop up alongside their job and their current activity. Once I gain full access to them as a team member, I get a clear overview of who they are. This is what I experience when I recruit Kate. While scanning her, initially I only receive general information, but after saving her from blackmail threats I obtain full access to all of her information. On the first screen I see her full name, her occupation and beneath that a short description of who she is as a person within this world. While walking around London I notice that this description can also contain a person's current task. For example, I encounter a man at Trafalgar Square whose character description mentioned that he comes there to cry from 13:00 until 13:30 and the characters I injured by driving my car or fighting with them also got a description that they were travelling to a nearby hospital because my character injured them.

### **Prominent player-characters in my playthrough**

#### **Kathleen**

Kathleen is the second character I encounter in the game, but the first I get to recruit in my team. While reading her description I notice that she is described as a podcaster cited for fighting with Albion guards. Aside from that her meta data shows me that she was recruited into DedSec by the NPC Sabine Brandt at the very beginning of the game, because DedSec saved them from a trafficking ring. Her data tells me that she is 21, has a grandmother, has her emergency contact info tattooed on her body, was born in Bradford, is suspected of morgue corpse theft, has multiple citations for trespassing on government property and is an aspiring stage magician. One part of why I choose her is based on the fact that she has a special ability called Albion vendetta, which gives her extra faction damage. The other part of why I choose her is based on the fact that I like that she is described as a woman in her early twenties, which I am as well. While I could choose a character with for example better hacking skills, gut tells me to choose a character closer to who I am instead.

This identity construction also shines through in one of the first things I choose to do as Kathleen. After recruiting her I notice that I do not like the way she dresses at all. After completing my first mission and collecting enough money, I decide that she should wear an outfit that reflects both her age and the fact that she is part of a hacker collective better. So, instead of an oversized t-shirt and jeans, I buy her some tech inspired clothing in Camden that reflect her personality and my ideas for the team better.

Furthermore, the fact that she was chosen so early in the game means that she cannot be assigned to a single character category like some of the other operatives can. After playing with Katherine Datt for a while I would say that she appears to me as a very generalized character in terms of her abilities. This also shines through in how playing as her feels. She does not outshine any of the other characters. While playing the game I do not choose her often though after obtaining more specialized characters for my team. I play as Kathleen if I feel like switching between members on the team or when I miss her personality. This does not happen very often as I prefer to choose characters that have more specific skills that apply to a mission. So, after a while I only encounter Kathleen during cutscenes at the end of a mission and in the headquarters where I interact with her as the character I embody at that moment.

### **Nicholas**

Some of the operatives join the team when the player frees their borough. This is how I acquire the character Nicholas Ivanov after triggering an uprising in Camden. He is described as a Hacker class character with the added bonus of four skills. He possesses the ability to viral hack which allows him to hack propagate, shock hack which electrifies enemies, key steal and crypto skim which steals in-world currency through hacking. His personal bio describes his recent events, which contains the reason why he joined DedSec, very specific demographics from his age to his salary and his grandfather and lover who both have names. Furthermore, his profile contains some metadata which gives him more characteristics such as the fact that he logged over 3000 hours on a first-person shooter, who he voted for, that he has been arrested for throwing eggs at Albion vehicles, that he likes foreign films and that his passport recently expired. Through playing as him, I learn that he has quite a pessimistic personality which becomes visible through his remarks during cutscenes and missions. He often states that he dislikes going on these missions and makes passive aggressive remarks towards Bagley. This personality is also reflected in the way he dresses. He only wears black, has a lot of piercings and slouches when he walks. He really does look like someone that does not like being there at all when completing a mission. I would argue that he looks like a true hacker stereotype and is a great addition to this team of characters because of that alone. Though while playing as him is more appealing than playing as Kathleen because of his many hacker perks, his personality does tend to be a bit too negative after a while. Which is why I also do not like playing as him as much as I like playing as the more positive characters. While I would not hesitate to use him for missions and think he fits into my team really well, I would state that if this were a single character game I would not choose Nicholas to be my main character because of his attitude.

### **Kate**

The third operative that I meet is the character of Kate Czobel. She is a construction worker character which means she has special skills that fit into that theme. Her special abilities are uniformed access which means she can access all construction sites without causing suspicion, a Cargo Drone that she can call, a special wrench melee weapon and a nail gun as a unique weapon. Her information describes her as someone that regularly publishes videos reviewing custom tools. Her demographics state that she is a 32-year-old construction worker with a salary of 15300 pounds. Her associates are her wife Nathalie Czobel, who is also a DedSec operative, and Elisabeth who is her social worker. Her metadata states that she is prescribed testosterone blockers, ran for union representative, is prescribed anti-depressants, was raised an orphan and completed a scaffolding apprenticeship. Most notably, her recent events also show that she was recruited by Nicholas because he saved her from Albion's blackmail scheme and that he also recruits her wife later in the game. The process of recruiting her is something I will describe with greater depth in the following paragraph called "choosing characters." In general, Kate plays as a very positive and happy character. Of all the

characters she is my favorite to complete missions with as she has great abilities such as the cargo drone and the uniformed access, but also brings a really positive view to what happens in the gameworld. Though, because the game often urges me to switch between characters and some missions ask for different abilities, I do not complete all my missions with her.

### **Choosing characters**

Choosing characters in *WD: L* is something that can either happen through pre-assignment, random occurrence or quests. As I play through the first few hours of the game, I encounter lots of different characters that can be recruited. This means that I have the opportunity to build my team from the get-go. This allows me freedom in how I want to construct my team and thus my identity within this game. If I feel like a character fits in my team or if I like their job or personality, they can become part of how I portray myself in this world. Aside from that, there are also some moments that are more scripted when it comes to choosing who becomes part of my team. For example, some of the characters I encounter are directly related to each other. This allows for an easy recruitment. This is the case with my character Nathalie. I meet her in the world of the game while I am finishing a mission and am able to recruit her without a character mission because of her connection to Kate. Of course, as I do not need her character to progress, I could also deny the recruitment based on the fact that I feel like her character does not fit my virtual identity.

Similar to the previous example, following the main storyline also gives me lots of opportunities to collect teammates that fit the objectives of a quest. For example, as stated before, Kate is one of the characters that joins the team in this way. The quest "Reporting for duty" starts with the objective to recruit a uniformed character in order to enter a restricted area. As the player I am sent to a construction site where a group of potential recruits are having their lunch break. This is where Bagsley tells me to choose one of them to help us. After going over all the traits, special abilities and meta data of these six construction workers, I conclude that they do not differ all that much and choose Kate based on the statement that she publishes tool review videos and that she looks like a nice character. Later in the game, I obtain a uniformed character in a similar fashion when I have to enter the Tower of London during the mission "inside Albion." As the building is owned by Albion, I will need an Albion guard to enter the restricted area. In order to obtain this guard, the map shows me a marker at their location. After completing a short character quest similar to Kate's, I also recruit them to the team. This recruitment differs from the first because the Albion agent is encountered on their own instead of in a group of similar characters like Kate was. This makes the choice easier for me, as there is no meta data to consider and their interchangeability is less obvious, but I do feel like I would have liked to choose a character for my team on my own instead of encountering them because the game assigned them to me. This takes away some of my freedom in building my identity through my collective protagonist.

### **Playing as a team**

While I spend most of my time focused on the individual characters, something I feel after finishing most missions is that there is a true sense of teamwork at the core of this game. While the missions have the potential to make my characters feel like individuals, each mission ends with them coming together in a team meeting with Sabine. My characters take place on a couch and videocall with Sabine to discuss what happened and what is going to happen next. This is where I first encounter a funny thing. Sabine, one of the most prominent non-player characters in this game, only addresses the characters as on the couch as "team" and never by their full name. Even after finishing most of the main missions, she does not seem to perceive these characters as individuals but only as "team" or "DedSec." While this does create a mysterious atmosphere for the meeting, it makes me think about how the characters are seen by the rest of the world in this game. After finishing this cutscene I try to take note of how other characters I come into contact with address my recruits. I see that, for

example when trying to recruit a lawyer after one of my teammates gets arrested, characters address me as “you must be DedSec” or even my own recruits introduce themselves as “I am DedSec.” There are no names involved in this process. The recruits are never addressed as individuals after they become part of the team and become a “we” and an “us” instead.

### **Free play playthrough**

During my ‘free play’ playthrough I recorded answers based on more general questions about the differences in dialogue between the player characters and what the routines of characters in the world are like.

### **Switching between characters**

During my free play playthrough I try to switch between characters in missions to learn more about how they change my experience of a mission. Aside from that, I also want to know if they will show very clear similarities to each other after switching between them. I get the answers to this by switching between Nicholas and Kate mid mission. Completing the mission as a different character shows me that they are not as similar as I thought initially. This shows me that the personalities of the characters in my team are quite different. Switching between Nicholas and Kate shows the difference between someone who does not like Bagley or any of the missions they have to perform, versus someone who makes jokes with Bagley and who states more positive things such as “woohoo if only my mum could see me now.” The characters can go from passive aggressive to extremely happy in the click of a button. Aside from that, some of the dialogue in cutscenes is also quite different. I actually manage to stop my game before a safe point during one of the earlier missions in my playthrough. This causes me to rewatch a cutscene with a different character and shows me a slight difference in dialogue that could be assigned to that difference in personality of these characters. At its core, the message of the cutscene stayed the same but now has a slight change in how one of my characters approaches Bagley. The changes are small, but definitely there. During my second playthrough I also learn that some of the characters I encounter in a mission are not always the same. During the mission that causes an uprising in Camden the character that acts as my contact is apparently randomized. So, the person I spoke with in my cooperative playthrough for this mission was not the same as the one I spoke with in this free play playthrough. They were both male but had completely different appearances.

### **Following characters around**

While staying in a certain place I can see that characters have build in schedules and narratives. For example, I see some Albion operatives harassing other characters and other characters can be seen stepping in at street corners and in certain neighborhoods at certain times of the day. Staying there shows me that characters play out a scene for a certain period of time and then disappear. It does not just keep happening.

The tech upgrade called Deep Profiler, which is needed to learn to recruit characters that are not friendly to DedSec, shows me the entire daily schedule of a character with the people they meet and the places they go to next to specific hours of the day. I was not prompted to buy this tech upgrade directly in my cooperative playthrough but decided to purchase it immediately in my free play playthrough. During this playthrough I decided to follow a character called Lachlan around according to his daily schedule to see how those schedules are build into the world and give character to the people that live in it. As I read through the schedule, I noticed that almost all of the day is filled with different places and tasks for his character. I first encounter him in Bloomsbury where he is performing with his saxophone from 8:00 until 16:00. As waiting for 8 in game hours is quite long in my opinion, I decide to look around the area for a bit until the end of this scheduled performance. After this I follow him to a location where he is shopping with his brother from 19:00

until 20:00. This shows his direct relation to other characters in the game. From 21:00 until 22:00 I encounter him at a bar called Sitton's where he is browsing the web.

Following Lachlan around does indeed show me that characters like him can stay at those places during those periods of time. Aside from that, accessing these schedules also adds some information to other characters in the world. For example, Lachlan also had a rival assigned to him. Later, while completing a different mission, I found this rival being arrested by Albion police. They had a tag under their name which stated that they were indeed the rival of the musician.