



Koen Leurs - 0225304

Playful identity formation

An inventory of its theory and practice

RMa Media Studies - Tutorial computer games

* Supervised by dr. Joost Raessens * 2006

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1 Media environments and identity formation

Over the course of the academic history of studying (new) media, an array of perspectives have addressed issues of new media and identity formation processes, and diverse claims have already been made. Through individual and collective media usage and engagement changes in the identity or self of individuals or groups substantiate. The observed significance and qualitative and quantitative impact of these transformations vary within the diversity of discourses aimed at understanding new media (Lister et al., 2003; 247). Dutch philosopher De Mul accepts the basic assumption stating that human personal and cultural identity is dynamically constructed by its mediating surroundings. In line with this train of thought he argues that alterations in these mediating structures will be reflected in human identity.

By means of a philosophical investigation of computer games he makes an inventory of the principles of what he understands as a “new tool of identity formation” (2005; 251a). According to him, broadly speaking and exceptions excepted, we are witnessing a major shift from narrative identity formation towards ludic identity formation, caused by an expansion of our domain of expression. It used to be mainly narratives that structure our (concept of the) world and (our concept of) ourselves, however gradually ludic structuring is becoming more and more present. “We interpret and narrate our past and we play and act upon our future projects”, which will eventually lead up to a transformation from narrative and interpretation to game and action (2005a; 261-262). This paper will evaluate the theory of playful identity formation by making an inventory of its theory and practice.

1.1 Ludic identity formation

The functioning of computer games in ludic identity formation is twofold and unfolds in three stages. Identity-formation is possible, because lived experiences are structured by the mediating settings and this shaped structure enables reflective identification. Here De Mul elaborates on Dutch philosopher Huizinga’s attempt to view culture “sub specie ludi” (1950; 4-5), thereby presupposing that “the great archetypal activities of human society are all permeated with play from the start” (ibid.) by looking at ludic characteristics within mediating structures.

The three stages, play₁, play₂ and play₃, as introduced by De Mul, follow Ricoeur’s notion of “la triple mimesis”. The theory of ludic identity formation is in essence an attempt to complement Ricoeur’s theory of narrative identity. The reading of triple mimesis by Ricoeur sees an imagined synthetic configuration of action (mimesis₂) as a mediator of mimesis₁ (pre-understanding) and mimesis₃ (understanding). M₁ and m₃ constitute *l’amont et l’aval* of m₂ (Ricoeur, vol I, 53). In line with this notion the two sides of play, p₁ and p₃, are mediated by the

intermediary position of p_2 . Namely, Ricoeur sees a reader as an operator par excellence traveling within a unity from mimesis₁, to mimesis₃, by way of mimesis₂ (ibid.).

Internalization of playful elements that were offered from within a pre set-up setting occurs as the result of an exploration. This exploration is done by means of play. The player experiences complete liberty and beliefs to be acting without some sort of subjection to external restraint whatsoever.

Play₁ describes “the ludic prefiguration of our daily life” (De Mul, 2005a; 260). In this stance, the world is experienced as playful. The repetitious and infinite play of the world, as in the permeation of human society with play, is hereby reflected in the playing of computer games. The expression of the experienced “pre-ludic coherence in games forms the level of play₂” results in a “Spielraum”, a space of possible action. This refers to the Heideggerian notion of a Spielraum, a room enabling free play which underlines that “playing always creates for itself the space within which it can form and that also means transform itself” (Inwood, 1999; 167). De Mul adds that this space becomes perceived as infinite and without closure (2005a; 260). The final stage of the ludic identity formation process, play₃, enables the identification and internalization of the player with “the space of possibilities disclosed by the game. The field of possible action is reflectively applied to the self” (ibid.). Hall states that “before a message can have an “effect” (however defined), satisfy a “need” or be put to a “use”, it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse” (2002; 53). This is exactly how I understand this phase; the playful identification process eventually needs an appropriation of the possibilities. The media user needs to establish his or her playful identity by ascertaining the definitive characteristics of it.

More concretely, this process can in my eyes exemplarily be understood as follows: in the first stage, a person gives in to his cravings, possibly initiated by recommendations made by his peers, and buys an iPod MP3 player. After unwrapping the wrappings, reading the manual, charging the machine’s batteries and downloading of music to the device, the user can explore the array of offered possibilities in the second stage. In this process, the user comes across the shuffle-option. Subsequently, after initial shilly-shallying, the user gets used to the experienced randomness of played numbers. This is the beginning of stage three, in which the mode of play is picked up by the user as a preferred way of consuming music. Once this is reflexively assumed, playful internalization of a new mediated setting and/or domain of expression has occurred.

Concluding, in this theory play and games are metaphors that work bipartitely. They cover human identity in itself but also the process of identity formation and shaping. The identity model is presented as hermeneutic and builds upon the likes of Dilthey and Ricoeur. Dilthey understood hermeneutics as interpretation that is fundamentally tied to its relation with

its historical objectification. Hereby understanding is based on studying external manifestations in order to grasp internal substance (2005). Playful identity expressions, thus, need to be grasped as embedded within their historical context in order to come to an understanding of human identity. Studying identity expressions can in this way underline the theoretical conceptualization of the shift from narrative towards playful identity formation.

1.2 NWO program Playful identities

To gain further understanding of the observed shift in our surrounding mediating structures towards ludic identity formation, De Mul acted as the chief applicant for the NWO research project *Playful identities. From narrative to ludic self-construction*. This interdisciplinary program aims to explore the degree to which digital information and communication technologies extend to within identity formation processes. In order to do so, ludic identity formation is case studied in three PhD projects and one final synthetic study. The media-objects illustratively studied are mobile phones, websites and computer games.

The study rests on three main pillars: a conceptual-philosophical framework, a media-theoretical approach and qualitative-empirical explorations, however, the theory of ludic identity formation, set out in an earlier publication, *A game of life*, remains the principle point of departure. In his article, by proposing ludic identity formation as such, De Mul offers us a conceptual framework which offers terms which altogether relate a model whose aim is to seize the reality in a structured form. The comparative PhD analyses of the three media-objects are all initiated to be of service to develop a general theory of ludic identity formation. The ambition is thus to proof the existence of and underline the relevance of studying ludification.

This can be found in the fourth and final project of the NWO research, which aims at a synthesis to further conceptualize the ongoing transformation. The three PhD projects are supposed to combine the three pillars to have a interdisciplinary research outlook. Besides questions that could arise on whether interdisciplinary is the right term for this mere combined analysis approach, since in my opinion it tends more towards being a multidisciplinary approach, whereby the main emphasis is laid on the macro-level. The conceptual-philosophical and media-theoretical approaches are really worlds apart from qualitative-empirical explorations. Of course, the generation of this threefold research model, under the umbrella of the basis theory, is based on the acceptance of a technological interactionism outlook on the relationship between communication technology and its users, thereby establishing a bridge between macro and micro, however my suggestion is that the bond between macro and micro could use support in order to be properly firm. This paper aims to investigate the uniting force or lack thereof in the Playful

identities research project. This will be done by looking into the possibilities of researching ludic identity formation in practice, and by exploring its proposed theory formation process.

2 On the practice of playful identity research: uses, gratifications and play

De Mul understands play as both a metaphor for human identity and as a metaphor for people's reflexive identity formation. In this section, it will be explored whether the uses and gratification outlook can offer possibilities to investigate the latter, by providing ways to understand people's selective interests and the "fashioning of what they see and hear (in media products, KL) to these interests", thereby encompassing both social as well as individual identification processes (Katz, 1959; 3).

2.1 The uses and gratifications approach

The study of media uses and gratifications (U&G), most popular during the 1970's-1980's, is one positive strand of criticism of the traditional media psychology effects approach that was formulated to step aside from the commonplace concerns about the negative psychological effects of media. Katz et al. defined the approach as "an attempt to explain something of the way in which individuals use communications, among other resources in their environment, to satisfy their needs and to achieve their goals" (1974; 21).

Ties with effects research remain present however, since it's in its fundamental core still a research approach which draws on traditional psychological theory. It draws most from the Maslow school of humanism, thereby rejecting behaviorism (Giles, 2003; 23). Maslow understood people's needs in life in a hierarchic fashion, and distinguished five sets of basic needs (1) psychological needs; (2) safety needs; (3) belongingness and love needs; (4) esteem needs and (5) a need for self-actualization. Biological and psychological (1) and (2) needs structure our actions however U&G research does not take into account this underlying level, it pays attention to sets (3), (4) and (5), which are also characterized as growth needs (Rosengren, 1974; 270). This way, individual differences among media users are addressed by looking at motives for using media and by coupling this with the specific needs the media use gratifies.

Principally, U&G research focuses on in what manner or way and for what purpose people use media. Nowadays, the approach is still employed to investigate cross-cultural media, multi-media and Internet. Examples of recent U&G research: Johnson and Kaye studied people's political internet usage during presidential elections on the Internet on the basis of political attitudes, Internet experience and personal characteristics (2004), Reece and Palmgreen address

motivations for Television use within a cultural context and find that new culture's media is important in the acculturation process of sojourners (2000), Papachrissi and Rubin examined usage motives to predict people's use of the Internet, concluding that the satisfied and mobile preferred instrumental Internet use and the less satisfied and less valued used the Internet as a functional alternative to interpersonal communication (2000), Kang and Atkin looked into grounds of multimedia addiction and found interactivity perceived as personalized and identity-laden (1999).

It has been argued earlier that, in comparison with film, some principles in video games are structured and/or experienced, similar to particular practical *real life* uses and gratifications. Grodal for instance theorized how players of computer games tend to “seek out stimulating spaces when bored”, similar to possible real life behavior, corresponding with the fact that players tend to “take shelter in some other spaces when over stimulated and in need of rest” in line with non-game conduct (Grodal, 2000; 204). These resemblances of computer gaming and real life behavior were fundamental for seeing relevancy in linking a specific typology of media-person interactions with the triad of logical play.

2.2 Matching U&G with play

Ricoeur's elucidation of mimesis elaborates on Aristotle's definition of mimesis, which “is not (as it is in Plato) an imitation of nature, but an imitation of an action” (Simms, 2003; 83), linking mimesis with *mythos* (emplotment). Characters are offered motives to act by means of the causal connections that are provided within the emplotment. Ricoeur states that the mimesis is circular, however it is not a vicious one, he states that “I would rather speak of an endless spiral that would carry the meditation past the same point a number of times, but at different altitudes” (72). In ludic identity formation, the links between the stages are not necessarily causal, but they form a dynamic nexus, which is still based on the basis of input and output. It's plausible that in parallel with the motives provided in narratives, users within current playful media environment disengages in finding personal motives as well. The uses and gratifications tradition can be useful exactly for this reason: understanding personal motives.

As was addressed earlier, De Mul's identity formation model has a hermeneutical fundament. Since this model elaborates on Dilthey's notion of hermeneutics, we need to take into account that Dilthey applies hermeneutics to “individual objects [...] not groups [...] as such” (Rickman, 2004; 119). The figure printed below, devised by Katz et al. as “a visualized paradigm for uses and gratifications research” (1974; 128) introduces us to a uses and gratification approach aimed at gaining understanding specifically on the level of individual subjects. Societal

influences coupled with individual features form the basis of the sought gratifications. Those are motives, seen as problems and/or solutions, structuring behavior. Behavior leads to gratification, or non-gratifications, providing input in order to start over the whole sequence.

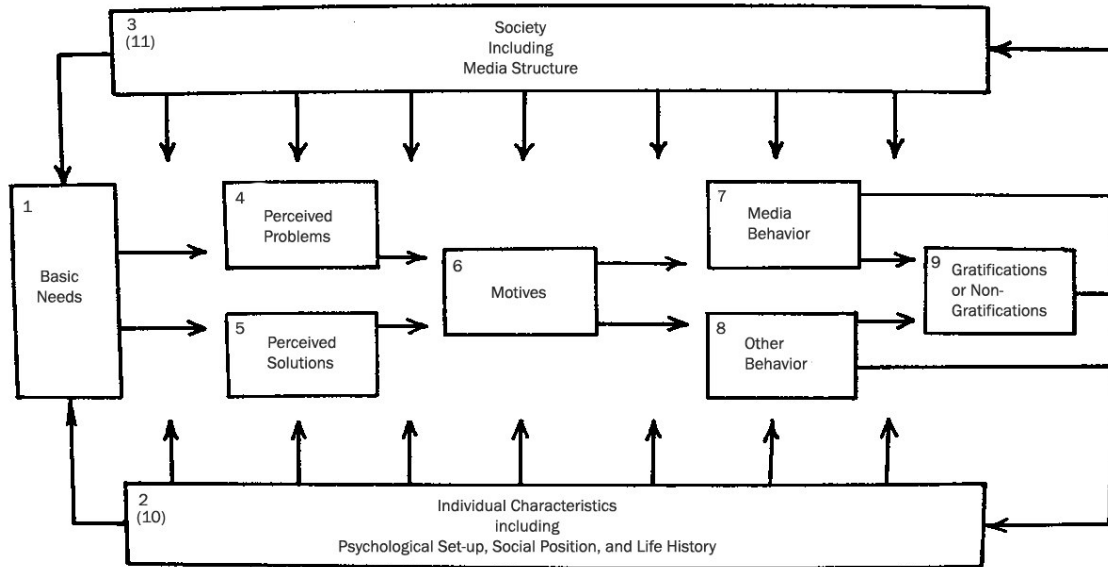


Figure 1. "Visualized paradigm for uses and gratifications research"

Elaborating on this model, McQuail stated that the approach is concerned with "(1) Personal social circumstances and psychological dispositions together influence both (2) general habits of media use and also (3) beliefs and expectations about the benefits offered by media, which shape (4) specific acts of media choice and consumption, followed by (5) assessments of the value of the experience (with consequences for further media use) and, possibly, (6) applications of benefits acquired in other areas of experience and social activity" (McQuail, 1988; 235).

Similar to circularity of the mimesis and play processes, this model visualizes the endless spiral of uses and gratifications. For uses and gratifications research on ludic behavior and its (re)configuration of lived experience by playfulness, U&G counterparts hereof need to be thought of and eventually studied. The model can provide a solid but basic point of departure to do so, by interpreting and coupling it as follows: boxes 1,2,3,4,5 and 6 can be identified as forms of lived experience ($play_1$), boxes 7 and 8 as expressions of this ($play_2$) and box 9,10 and 11 as (self)-understanding ($play_3$).

Under the heading of $play_1$, individual as well as societal influences on the usage of new possibilities to express oneself can be investigated. Let's insert the concrete example of the introduction of the PlayStation Portable to illustrate this. By marketing this product as the arrival

of “the portable entertainment revolution” and describing the device as a provider that “gives you the freedom to enjoy entertainment on your terms” (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2006), the individual as well as the society is addressed. Ideally, from Sony’s perspective, consumers by coming across commercials that disseminate this message can perceive it as a problem that they aren’t enjoying the personal freedom of instantaneous handheld control over entertainment everywhere. From a broader perspective, the portable entertainment revolution pressures society, since (for instance through peer pressure) motives can arise for addressing the individual basic need for having a device. Owning a device eventually can become to be perceived as a solution for a (marketed) perceived problem. On an individual level however, consumers eventually decide whether they find owning of the device a basic need. Play₂ covers the expression of this behavior. Owners of a PSP explore its possibilities within this phase, eventually leading up to arrogation of it under play₃. The (non) gratification found in the device results in feedback to the broader society and the personal livelihood of the owner. A possible alteration in the personal psychological set-up acquired (in this case from narrative to playful identity formation) through the process of identity formation with the new medium is the main topic of interest for De Mul.

2.3 Implementation

As play₂ is fundamental as a mediator between play₁ and play₃, the boxes 7 and 8 are fundamental in understanding a subject’s uses and gratifications. McQuail et al. came up with a typology, which “is intended to differentiate certain common constellations of disposition and response” (1972; 154-155). This typology is not aimed at gaining insight in “discrete motives” or “the occurrence of a precise effect”, but is formulated to “differentiate certain common constellations of disposition and response” (ibid.). Schematically, the typology, is formulated as follows:

- Category 1: Diversion
 - a. Escape from the constraints of routine
 - b. Escape from the burdens of problems
 - c. Emotional release
- Category 2: Personal Relationships
 - a. Companionship
 - b. Social utility
- Category 3: Personal Identity
 - a. Personal reference
 - b. Reality exploration
 - c. Value reinforcement / self-explanation
- Category 4: Surveillance

This typology can help us to understand how the varieties of media offerings are used by the individual to help him understand the elements in the world perceived by him or her as important. De Mul's elaboration on the social construction of human identity can be placed on the verge of diversion, personal relationships, personal identity and surveillance. He namely states under the header of communicability that changes in media are reflected on different levels and in different ways, such as in relationships between individuals and the world they live in.

Elaborating on this thought, the four categories can be comprehended as follows: Diversion must be seen as the umbrella term for distraction caused by entertainment and amusement, which allows a further division. The attention of an individual or group is hereby diverted away from routine or problems on to another subject. Emotional release covers the act of relieving of feelings. The personal relationships category covers relationships between people and those that are labelled as "para-social" relationships. These cover a "perceived personal relationship between a media persona and an audience member" (Brown & Fraser, 2004; 105). The types of gratifications that can be understood under the heading of personal identity "brings together ways of using programme materials to reflect upon or to give added salience to something important in the viewer's own life or situation". This offers us possible ways to gain insight into personal referential, reality explorative and (self) value reinforcement gratifications, by usage of medial contents "to characterize or highlight" some feature of present or historical features of participants and their own situation, character and/or life (McQuail et al., 1972; 159). The final category is related to the reality exploration type, it however covers gathering information in a broader context, such as in public affairs.

2.4 Methodology

The U&G research approach can be applied as a clear-cut addition for the qualitative empirical exploration for the playful identities project. Methodologically speaking, Katz et al. recognized that goals set by individual audience members, such as interests and motives, can best be reported by the audience members themselves, since we can expect that they will be able to report things that they recognize in themselves" (1974; 22). Within the NWO-research project in-depth interviews are noted as a methodological technique as a part of the qualitative-empirical description approach.

However, it is well known that audience motivational theory is not easily translated in and/or verifiable via empirical tools (McQuail, 2000; 390) this can for instance, structured along the typology discussed above, be conducted based on an expectancy-value model of media gratifications, as has been issued by Palmgreen and Rayburn in 1985 as cited in McQuail (ibid.).

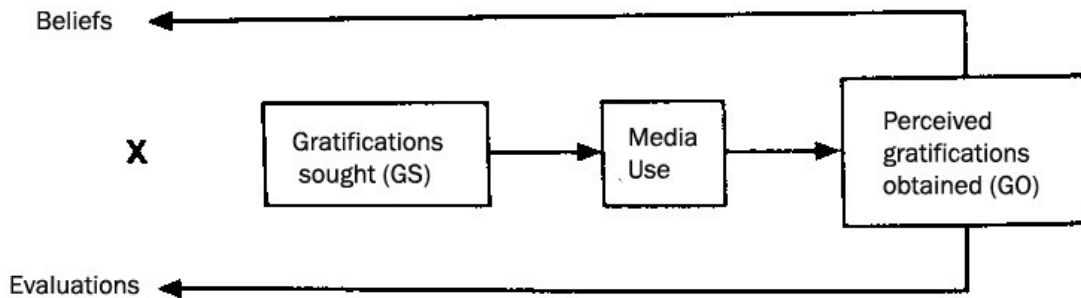


Figure 2. An expectancy-value model of media gratifications sought and obtained

The model, as is implicitly present in both the U&G approach described in the visualized paradigm and the spiral of mimesis and play, “identifies an increment over time from media use behavior” (ibid.). The spiral is therefore in all those cases not a vicious one, but can be characterized by its circular character that functions respectively at different levels or different altitudes as noted by Ricoeur. This way, by means of interviews, personal motivations as an outcome of societal forces and the subject’s personal biography can be begotten. Those can be interpreted from the conceptual-philosophical and media-theoretical perspectives in order to provide practical understanding and to make arguments more fundamentally sound.

In the research project, a so-called qualitative-empirical research is described as an addition to the conceptual-philosophical and media-theoretical investigation. However, empirical research is generally based on (a combination of qualitative and) quantitative research. By incorporating the U&G research approach, it’s possible to carry out an inquiry on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative research, for instance by means of classifying personal motives on uses and gratifications by means of the categorization offered by the McQuails topology and the expectancy-value model.

3 Playful identity formation and its theory

The aim of the Playful identities research project is to make an inquiry on to whether “digital information and communication technologies are transforming the (construction of) personal and cultural identity” (2005b). In order to do so, an earlier outlined theory of ludic identity formation is applied, to critically investigate the observed transformation. This way, the theory is used as the basic point of departure for the three PhD-projects and the concluding synthetic study. This chapter will address and evaluate the ludic identity theory building process from an outsider perspective.

3.1 Building a theory

Theory building aimed at offering explanatory mechanisms, can be given in by a bottom up observed need, shift or problem or a top down aim of better world apprehension. De Mul observed a cultural shift from happenings to actions and to interpretation to reflection. To apprehend this, he outlined an explanatory mechanism to come to a understanding of present-day (cultural) life. Grasping the world by means of one theoretical concept in this manner asks for elaborative testing, examination and reflection. The problem with a mere “one size fits all” approach is the difficulty of complete comprehension and adequate testing and falsification (Burgoon, 2001; 54).

Let’s visualize the matter of shaping a theory, before exploring concrete application and theory-testing.

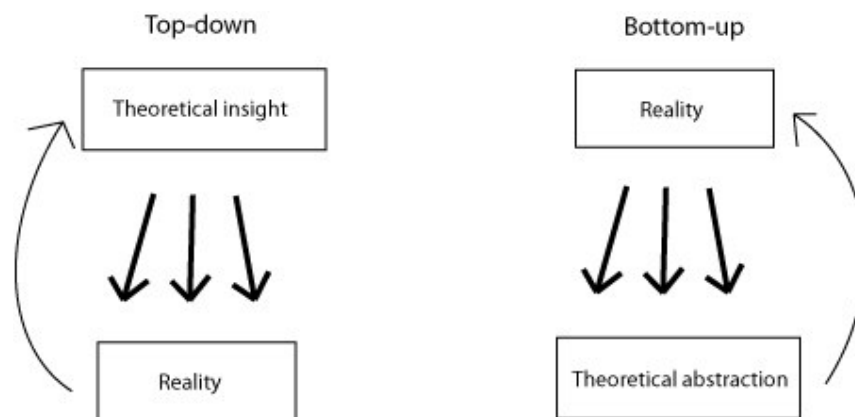


Figure 3. 2 Models of theory-building. Top-down versus bottom-up.

The top-down perspective of theory building can be understood as follows: a theoretical insight on society or life in general, leads up to an exploration of inventory to see whether real life is actually structured along this principle. When approaching theory building from a bottom-up perspective, theoretical apprehension originates from abstraction of reality. Specific elements observed in for instance our everyday life can be labelled, framed and interpreted in this way. More specific, metaphorically speaking, oak trees, or larger conceptual theoretical interpretations can grow out of smaller theoretical abstractions, much like oak trees grow from smaller acorns (ibid.).

The methodological precaution of ascending analysis of power, as described by Foucault can be seen as illustrative for this matter. He underlined the importance of conducting an ascending analysis of power, instead of a deduction of power. When one understands basic levels or “molecular elements of society”, later on, generalization will be more convenient, according to

Foucault. “Starting [...] from its infinitesimal mechanisms, which each have their own history, their own trajectory [...], and then see how these mechanisms of power have been [...] invested, colonized, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended etc, by ever more general mechanisms and by forms of global domination” (1980; 99). Extensions within our society of a certain phenomenon can be studied thoroughly this way, eventually leading up to a specialization to end up with the abstract core of the matter.

Examples of ascending analysis of power that deal with roughly the same topic as De Mul, whereby progression from a small unit towards a larger unit is observable, are for instance the following theoretical abstractions of identity construction through the consumption of media technologies and through Internet behavior. Moores understood the possibilities of making choices in media technology in the live of adolescents as a marker of a rise in autonomy, and thereby theorized consumption of media consumption as an active process of identity construction (1993). Chandler understood the constant fluctuate character of personal websites as a direct, abstracted, reference to the “under construction” characteristic of the identities of the makers of these websites (1998). Tobin theorized the online behavior of his son, describing and analyzing his assuming of an online male performative identity (1998; 145).

De Mul however didn't start small to let concrete observations evolve into a larger framework. He described a power centre and looked for extensions of it within society. Reading *The game of life* and the NWO application of the research project, ludic identity appears to be conceptualized in a top-down fashion, albeit based on a small number of described minor observations, and is now tried to be applied on concrete everyday life elements. The power centre was an observed shift towards playful identity formation based on the proliferation of computer games within our society. On the basis of a theoretical insight, three PhD projects are now set up to connect concrete specific examples to the theory, in order to test it. Of course, this is paper is not chiefly aimed at making an argument for bottom-up theory building since it's completely acceptable to address an insight and elaborate on this through micro-level research. However, explicating a new interpretive framework this way can bring about certain practical problems.

One problem, observed above in the coupling of a macro and micro level research approach on ludic identity, is a clear example of this argument. The conceptual-philosophical insight of a transformation towards ludic identity formation was the main motive for investigating playful elements. To investigate this, media-theoretical and qualitative-empirical methods are utilized. At least in the NWO research application, bridges between the three approaches are somewhat far-fetched or illogical. This can be due to the defining of both the

conceptual and media theoretical approaches. These are defined on a totally different level than the qualitative-empirical method.

Maybe this can be described as follows. When accepting the idea that two different types of theoretical terms can be distinguished, being on the one hand a constitutive and on the other hand an operational one, the overall way of apprehension and investigating the matter of playful identity can be explained and criticized. The constitutive or conceptual type of definition is a formal one that sets boundaries and excludes it from other theories. It includes a restricted area of thought and excludes others. The operational definition set makes the empirical instantiation apparent. The constitutive terms ought to have corresponding ways of being applied in terms of operationalization (Burgoon, 2001; 51-52). However originating from psychics and social sciences, operationally defining concepts is one way or another central to all sciences.

As Tankard insists, research on conceptualization of media (framing) needs careful operationalization of the concept itself in order to be able to do serious theory building. Advantages of an empirical approach to do so are similar to advantages of social science research: (1) determining the reliability of concepts through measurement, (2) reliability means moving beyond subjectivity, (3) operationalization ideally shapes replicable results, (4) the power of theory testing can add up to greater insights and thereby stronger tenable theories (2003; 104). Operationalization can hereby be understood as twofold; it can function as a process which further defines the conceptual definition as well as a way of measuring the concept through specific observations.

It was noted earlier that the approaches within the Playful identities projects were appearing as standing somewhat on their own. This can be due to the fact that the conceptual-philosophical notion is to be studied via both media-theoretical and qualitative-empirical methods. The media-theoretical approach, as a methodology, investigates identification processes on a different level in comparison with the utilization of qualitative-empirical methods. Media-theoretical operationalizations so to say merely function as tools for narrower defining of the concept of playful identity formation, whereas qualitative-empirical methods are observations that measure the concept. As different ends of the (research) spectrum, synthesis is thwarted because the media-theoretical methods and the conceptual-philosophical framework are operating on the same level of theoretical abstraction, while on the contrary the empirical methods are much more concrete tools. This discrepancy can possibly be laid bare while apprehending playful identity formation as paradigmatic.

3.2 Playful identity formation as a paradigm

Weber states that four general types of theories exist within the humanities, being: (a) “Paradigmen”, (b) “Supertheorien”, (c) “Basis-theorien” and (d) Theorien mittler Reichweite (2003; 16-17). These types of theories all exhibit different levels of abstraction. On a scale of abstraction, paradigms are literally and figurally speaking standing on top of the world and theories of middle range stand have the undermost level of abstraction.

Hereby a paradigm is understood in line with Kuhn’s description of the character of academic progress. Fundamental underpinnings of paradigms are agreements on what is to be observed and scrutinized, the kind of questions that are supposed to be asked and probed for answers in relation to this subject, how these questions are to be put and how the results of scientific investigations should be interpreted (1964; 10-13). He argued that “science in one period is characterized by a set of ideas and practices that constitute a paradigm, and when problems or anomalies begin to accumulate in a given paradigm, there often was introduced a new paradigm which, in fact and in logic, repudiated the old and supplanted it” (Machamer & Silberstein, 2002, p. 7).

Whereas paradigms can be characterized as totalitarian, super theories can be labeled as universal. Super theories are twofold, on the one hand, they are a meta theories standing above other theories and on the other hand, they try to grasp something in it’s whole (Weber, 2003; 18). In addition, Brunkhorst states that super-theories tend to make universalistic claims and in connection with that they include themselves and their opponents within their assertion (1996; 94). Basic theories such as semiotics offer a logical and consistent set of notions, definitions and models. Basic theories are empirically verifiable, and follow basic assumptions that are accepted within the domain of study (Weber, 2003; 19). The most precise theories with a narrow or specialized domain of investigation are the theories of middle range. These principally cover media functioning and usage. The U&G approach is an example of such a theory.

The all-embracing worldview as it was described by De Mul can be seen as a super theory and as a paradigmatic way of seeing things. This can possibly partly be ascribed towards the top-down manner of theory building. By taking a theory of ludic identity formation as the basic principle to understand a transforming culture, it works as a meta-theory, embracing other notions of identity formation and media-theoretical ideas. Ludic identity formation, as a influence that structures lived experience in human life and enables reflective identification, can so be understood as a universal outlook. An axiom for interpreting growing dominance of playful characteristics within our culture is presented as such, offering possibilities to explain the changing spatial organization and number of activities we are engaged (De Mul, 2005; 262).

Operating in a top-down manner, the theory can also work as totalitarian. As a paradigm¹, playful identity formation can become a paradigm. Mitterer carried this notion through in its extreme by stating:

“es geht mir unter anderem auch darum, die Etablierung von Paradigmen zu verhindern. Die Paradigmen sind Paradogmen, in denen es immer eine Wahrheit gibt, die, wenn sie einmal gefunden wurde, nicht mehr verlassen werden soll. Die Wahrheit setzt sich dabei aus Auffassungen zusammen, die unter keinen Umständen aufgegeben und unter allen Umständen verteidigt werden“ (Mitterer, cited in Weber, 2003; 17).

Although De Mul acknowledges this by stating that narrative and ludic identity coexist and thereby do not exclude each other (De Mul, 2005; 261), the initial concept in his Playful identities research project is ludic identity formation. The danger of using one basic assumption can in its most extreme case lead to a paradigmatic approach whereby a notion on the truth becomes accepted and fixed. This way, over interpretation in order to be able to address findings under the one proper header can come about. When ludic identity formation is accepted and taken for granted as a starting point for any investigation, this can restrict the researcher from looking beyond the borders of this identity formation process.

Lather stated that paradigms can provide ordering principles. These grasp “an untidy universe, but to demand that all inquiry decisions to be in line with the worldview embodied in a paradigm is problematic”. Therefore, she argues that a postmodernist perspective “via recognition of our embeddedness in past practises and the continual shifts and realignments of the present” on (social) inquiry can change the way of doing empirical research in human sciences (1990; 331). By means of empirical research, the unchangeable character (when this is the case) of the conceptual and theoretical approach can be laid bare. By doing so, several different (descending) steps on the ladder of abstraction can be made. Insight in for instance individuals’ future gratifications sought and historical gratifications obtained, characterized through categories can sustain philosophical and theoretical notions beyond the borders of a paradigm.

¹ Ignoring the fact that a paradigm can hardly be ascribed to a recent insight by one single scholar. Consolidation of the basic assumption of the shift from narrative towards playful identity formation by other scientists within the field is necessary to come to speak of a scientific revolution as such.

4 Conclusions

Dutch philosopher De Mul believes that human personal and cultural identity is dynamically constructed by its mediating surroundings. Accepting the idea that alterations in these mediating structures will be reflected in human identity, he initiated a research program entitled *Playful Identities. From Narrative to Ludic Self-Construction*. The program, aims at describing an ongoing transformation that was observed in the staggering proliferation of computer games, to come to an understanding of changing reflective identity formation processes. This paper assessed playful identity formation by making an inventory of its theory and practice.

In order to do so, at first an elaboration on ludic identity as it was formulated as such by De Mul was given. On this basis, the practical application as described in the research project was looked into. It showed that the three research pillars in the project were built from different materials causing difficulties while aiming at a synthetical research approach. The incorporation of the conceptual-philosophical and media-theoretical approaches and qualitative-empirical explorations as they were described in the research project was not necessarily clear-cut. To bridge the gap between on the one hand the conceptual and theoretical approach and on the other hand the qualitative-empirical explorations, the uses and gratifications approach was introduced. The principal aim of studying U&G emerged as corresponding with the hermeneutical fundament of De Mul's identity formation model. This, namely, also focuses on understanding on the level of the individual object.

The visualized paradigm for uses and gratifications research issued by Katz et al. showed an array of possibilities for coupling either play₁, play₂ or play₃ with the uses and gratifications approach. The typology by McQuail showed ways to analyze motives more in-depth. Palmgreen and Rayburn's expectancy-value model of media gratifications sought and obtained offer ways to ascend the ladder of abstraction, thereby bridging the gap between the three approaches of the research project. By incorporating the U&G research approach, possibilities arise to carry out an inquiry on the basis of both quantitative and qualitative research, whereby media-usage on the level of the individual subject can be characterized and categorized to illustrate, extend and sustain the theory ludic identity formation.

The theory building of ludic identity formation, in line with Dilthey's hermeneutical understanding which is based on studying external manifestations in order to grasp internal substance, was shown to be understandable as a top-down approach. It was argued that, in line with Foucault's methodological precaution of ascending analysis of power, operationalization problems can arise when working according to these procedures. This was further illustrated by investigating the theory as a super theory and paradigm and its inherent restricting functioning.

5 References

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5.1 Figures

Figure 1:

Katz, Elihu., Blumler, Jay G., Gurevitch, Michael., Utilization of mass communication by the individual. The uses of mass communications. Current perspectives on gratifications research. Eds. Blumler, Jay. G., Katz, Elihu. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1974. p. 128

Figure 2:

McQuail, Denis. McQuail's Mass Communication Theory. 4th Edition. London: Sage, 2000. p. 390.

Figure 3:

2 Models of theory-building. Top-down versus bottom-up.

Front cover image:

Inspired by painting *Walking* by Ryan Larking and technologies and communication techniques such as P2P networks, the Nokia N-Gage, the U2 I-pod, Samsung mobile phones, hypertext, Sony PSP and Microsoft Xbox.

