

# Alter Ego:

## A Social Networking Website for Online Gamers

Casey Fiesler casey@cc.gatech.edu  
Marleigh Norton marleigh@mit.edu

April 22, 2005

1	Introduction.....	2
2	Background Research.....	2
3	Scenarios.....	4
3.1	Scenario 1 – Searching for Teammates .....	4
3.2	Scenario 2 – Following Up on an In-Game Meeting.....	6
3.3	Scenario 3 – Keeping Track of Favorite Role-players .....	7
4	Design Documentation .....	9
4.1	Main Screen Elements .....	10
4.2	Member Screen Elements .....	11
4.3	Home.....	14
4.4	Profile Pages.....	18
4.5	Other .....	24
5	Third Places .....	27
6	Design Factors.....	28
6.1	Purpose.....	28
6.2	Gathering Places .....	29
6.3	Profiles .....	29
6.4	Leadership.....	30
6.5	Code of Conduct.....	30
6.6	Cyclic Events.....	30
6.7	Range of Roles .....	30
6.8	Sub-Groups .....	31
6.9	Real World .....	31
7	Identity.....	32
8	Social, Technical, and Political.....	34
9	Deviant Behavior and Governance .....	37
10	Privacy and Access.....	39
11	Participation and Lurking .....	41
12	Conclusion .....	42
13	References.....	43
14	Appendix.....	45
14.1	Alter Ego Interview Guide.....	45
14.2	Profile Page: USSIntegrity.....	50
14.3	Who Did What.....	51

## 1 Introduction

When meeting someone new in person, we immediately have available certain information about them derived simply from appearances [7]; however, in order to make a decision about whether this new person is someone we are interested in interacting with further, we often want to find out even more about them. The same is true online, though the issue becomes even more complicated by the absence of these initial appearance cues.

Amy Bruckman makes a similar point about virtual communities:

*It's a lot harder to find a good virtual community than it is to find a good bar. The visual cues that let you spot the difference between Maria's [a family restaurant] and the Sportsman [a biker bar] from across the street are largely missing. [2]*

In online role-playing communities, it is hard to find out if someone would be enjoyable to play with just by looking. Appearance and body language of avatars is generally very limited: an outgoing gossip looks largely the same as a cold-blooded character killer. Most role-players would find one of these people unbearable to interact with, though which one varies on that person's playing style. Simply because you *can* interact with everyone doesn't mean you *want* to interact with everyone. Today's online role-players are choosy, largely from past negative experiences. Alter Ego is designed to leverage existing social networks to help like-minded role-players find each other, making connections they carry back into their online communities.

## 2 Background Research

The midterm projects in this class, as well as the different sites we have discussed, have shown that there are many kinds of online communities in which the user takes on a

persona other than his own. Examples include Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) such as World of Warcraft, blog-based Role-Playing Games (RPGs), and more social environments such as LambdaMOO and Second Life.

In our past research, we have independently examined MMORPGs (Marleigh) and blog-based RPGs (Casey). Because we had both conducted interviews with members of the target audience, we were already familiar with their needs. We have found that some of the major problems that participants in these types of communities face are connecting to other members and finding games that are a good fit. We also found that it is not unusual for people to participate in more than one type of community – in essence, to have a string of different personas across the Internet.

The idea behind Alter Ego is to provide both a way for different players to network with each other as well as to connect their personas together, for the benefit of both the person behind them and those that they encounter in different games. We essentially saw it as "Friendster for role-playing games." Our first step was to examine other social networking sites – Friendster ([www.friendster.com](http://www.friendster.com)), Orkut ([www.orkut.com](http://www.orkut.com)), My Space ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com)), and Facebook ([www.thefacebook.com](http://www.thefacebook.com)) – in order to decide which features would be relevant for our site. We also examined some other sites that had relevance to our design plans – Amazon ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) and Netflix's ([www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com)) rating systems, and Craig's List personals ([www.craigslist.org](http://www.craigslist.org)).

After an initial pass at screenshots (profile pages), we interviewed four volunteers with varying degrees of role-playing experience to verify our understanding of the needs of online role-players. We asked them about their experiences in different communities

and their experiences with social networking sites. We then explained our design, showed them screenshots, and received their feedback to inform later iterations of the design.

One interviewee was a 27 year old PhD female student who plays Puzzle Pirates. Another was a 29 year old male game designer who played Ultima Online and currently plays Second Life. The last two were both male computer science PhD students who play World of Warcraft. For the 23 year old, that is his only game, but the 26 year old has also played City of Heroes, Asheron's Call, Dark Age of Camelot, Final Fantasy XI, and Everquest. Our interviews were conducted in person, which limited our subject pool to the Atlanta area. The interview guide is included in §14.1 Alter Ego Interview Guide.

### **3 Scenarios**

#### **3.1 Scenario 1 – Searching for Teammates**

Edgar has been getting frustrated. He is an avid player of World of Warcraft, but is stuck on a particular dungeon, Blackfathom Deeps. He needs to complete a quest there as part of his paladin training, but all of the usual people he plays with aren't the right level to enjoy the quest. The perfect thing would be to find a few other paladins and all do the quest together. To help put a group together, he logs in to Alter Ego.

On his home page, he sees a few recommendations for people to game with. It indicates that several of his friends enjoyed gaming with someone named Lydia, who has a character near the same level as his. He sends her a message to see if she's interested in a trip to Blackfathom Deeps. Next, he clicks on the search button at the top of the screen. He enters the criteria for his search – game: World of Warcraft, server: Dragonblight, level: 20-24, class: paladin. First, he restricts his search to his friends, but as he expected,

that search comes up empty. Next he expands his search to friends of friends. He gets a few hits this time, and sends messages to these players to see if they want to game together.

After that, Edgar decides to check the personals by clicking on the button at the top of the screen. At first, the personals are unfiltered, and he sees listings for everything from magic swords for sale to invitations to a LAN party in Seattle. He sets the ads to only display people seeking people personals for the Dragonblight server of World of Warcraft. None of the remaining ads mention the Blackfathom Deeps quest specifically, but several offer to help with one quest in exchange for help with another. Edgar answers a few of these ads. Finally, he writes his own ad:

*Paladin seeks teammates for 20<sup>th</sup> level class quest in Blackfathom Deeps.  
Willing to bribe with sharpening stones. Send message here or in game.  
– Edgar for Khazgerd*

The signature “Edgar for Khazgerd” is inserted automatically as Edgar tags his ad as pertaining to his paladin, Khazgerd. Now when people look at his ad, they can click on either “Edgar” or “Khazgerd” to find out more about either the player or the character. As Edgar posts the ad, he notices the new message icon near the top of the screen, telling him that he has a new Alter Ego message. He clicks on the “messages” button and checks. It’s from Lydia, saying that Blackfathom Deeps sounds like fun, and should she bring her 25<sup>th</sup> level mage or her 18<sup>th</sup> level rogue? As he begins to answer Lydia’s mail, Edgar gets another message. It’s someone else responding to his personal ad. Using the connections he made with Alter Ego, Edgar is able to set up an adventuring party and finish his quest.

## 3.2 Scenario 2 – Following Up on an In-Game Meeting

Julia is a new player of Yohoho! Puzzle Pirates. So far, she's been enjoying it. She had an especially good time last night when she met FlounderEye. They traded fish puns the entire evening. It was such fun, Julia wishes she could talk to FlounderEye again, but he wasn't online when she logged in last. A friend, Emily, suggests that she try looking up FlounderEye on Alter Ego.

Julia navigates to Alter Ego and clicks on the search button. She fills out some fields – game: Puzzle Pirates, name: FlounderEye. She's not quite sure what server means, so she leaves that blank and clicks on the go button. Good luck, the search returns with one page! She clicks on the link and goes to FlounderEye's page, where she discovers that FlounderEye is played by someone called Fearsome Fish who also has a few other characters named HalibutHead and SquidFace. That's pretty much all there is in the profile. Julia is disappointed that there isn't anything more personal. Emily points out that perhaps Fearsome Fish only allows certain information to be seen by his friends, and suggests that Julia make her own account and request to be Fearsome Fish's friend.

Julia creates an account by entering her email address and selecting a screenname and password. A help window explains how she can add characters by clicking on the create button at the top of the screen. She does so, and is prompted to enter a game name. She enters Puzzle Pirates and clicks the go button. Two games are returned: Puzzle of the Pirate's Gold RPG Blog and Yohoho! Puzzle Pirates. She selects the latter. Next, she fills out the basic profile for her pirate character, GoldieLox. The character is added, and now when she looks at her page, she can look at her personal profile or her Puzzle Pirates profile.

Having finished creating her account, Julia searches for Fearsome Fish again and finds him. She gets a little more information this time. The player lives in Wisconsin and likes Dr. Seuss. That sounds fine. Julia clicks the button to request that Fearsome Fish become her friend, and rates him as a “favorite gaming partner”. She adds a note, saying that they played together last night, and she hopes they’ll see each other in game again some time.

By the next day, Julia’s friend request has been approved. She checks Fearsome Fish’s profile again, and finds out his birthday is August 22<sup>nd</sup>. In the notes section, she sees a surprising message. It turns out that “Fearsome Fish” is actually two people, a nine year old boy and his mother. The boy isn’t allowed to play by himself, so he and his mom play together. The mom controls the character at the son’s direction. Julia had assumed she was talking to a teenager or young adult. She’s glad she knows now, so she can watch her language.

### **3.3 Scenario 3 – Keeping Track of Favorite Role-players**

*This is considered an unusual use of Alter Ego, but draws attention to possible use by the blog role-playing community, which the system can also serve.*

Having followed a blog-based Harry Potter RPG on Livejournal for several months, Anne has decided that she might be interested in participating. However, the game she has been watching is not accepting new players. She has used Alter Ego in the past to connect with people playing Everquest, and knows that it can be used for smaller games as well; she decides to try to find a different blog RPG.

When she goes to the games search screen and types in 'Harry Potter' as a keyword, a dozen different entries appear. She is a bit daunted by the idea of looking

through all of them to find one that she likes, so she decides to seek some advice. She has had brief exchanges in Livejournal comments with the person who plays Hermione in the game she watches; she seems really nice, and Anne wonders if she might know of a good game that is accepting new players.

Rather than trying to track down contact information on Livejournal, Anne decides to see if Hermione's player has an Alter Ego profile. Glancing at the list of search results again, she is pleased to see that the game is listed, and when she goes to its page, even more pleased to see that Hermione is one of the handful of characters listed there. Clicking on Hermione's profile, she sees that the name of the player is 'Jem', probably a pseudonym.

Jem doesn't have any contact information visible to non-friends. Anne puts in a friends request to her, making a note that she recognizes her from a Harry Potter RPG. In the meantime, she looks around her profile a bit more. Besides the game that she is familiar with, Jem also plays in two other games: USS Caledonia (Anne wonders if this is a Star Trek game) and Triumverate. Anne clicks on "Triumverate" and sees that it is another Harry Potter role-playing blog, and Jem plays Remus!

Anne notices that Jem is also part of a group called "Triumverate," and guesses that this is a sub-community for players of the game. She clicks on the link, and discovers she is correct! Anne finds a thread in the forums advertising for new players. Even though she hasn't gotten in touch with Jem yet, she decides that a game that has such a talented writer must be worth playing, and immediately clicks on the link for the game's Livejournal and puts in an application. Later, she adds her new character, Hannah Abbott, to her list of characters in her Alter Ego profile.



## 4 Design Documentation

Alter Ego is a web site, to be used with any web browser.

The screenshot shows the Alter Ego website interface. At the top, a purple banner contains the text "Welcome, Casey. [ log out ]" and the "ALTER EGO" logo. Below the banner is a navigation menu with links: home, my profile, search, personals, messages, create, and about. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Casey Profile:** A central section with a purple header. It includes a profile picture of Casey, a "name:" field with the value "Casey", "gender:" "female", "birthday:" "February 16", "age:" "23", and "location:" "Atlanta, GA". The profile is marked as "updated: 4/20/05". The "about me:" section contains the text: "I'm a graduate student who enjoys long walks on the beach and bubble baths." Other fields include "AIM name: ladylazarus3", "website: http://gehennom.net/~casey", and "phone #: 555-555-5555". A "[more]" link is at the bottom right.
- World of Warcraft, ExObscurus, USSIntegrity, Everquest:** A vertical list of game titles on the left side of the profile section.
- Friends:** A section with a purple header showing a grid of friend avatars. Visible names include marleigh, marilyn, flamesplash, ravelite, and robert. A "[more]" link is at the bottom right.
- Groups:** A section with a purple header showing a grid of group avatars. Visible names include Blue Hair, vampires, Everquest women, Trek C&MS, and Explorer's Guild. A "[more]" link is at the bottom right.
- Announcements:** A section with a purple header containing several text-based announcements, such as "Starting a D&D campaign in the Atlanta area? Anyone interested? [marleigh]" and "Our guild's accepting new members - but just people we know! [marleigh]".
- Personals:** A section with a purple header containing text-based personal ads, such as "Willing to buy linen cloth for one silver a sheet. [link]" and "Second level elf seeks weekly gaming group. [link]".
- Testimonials:** A section with a purple header containing a testimonial: "Casey's got a great beat. You can dance to her. [marleigh]". A "[more]" link is at the bottom right.

Figure 1: Alter Ego screen, the user Casey is logged in and viewing her own profile.

## 4.1 Main Screen Elements

The basic screen elements seen on every page of Alter Ego are the Title Bar and the Button Bar.

### 4.1.1 Title Bar



**Figure 2: Title Bar**

- “Welcome, Casey.” lets the user know who is logged in.
- **Log out** allows the user to explicitly close her Alter Ego session.

### 4.1.2 Button Bar



**Figure 3: Button Bar**

- **Home** takes the user to her home page, described in §4.3 Home.
- **My Profile** takes the user to her real life profile page, described in §4.4 Profile Pages.
- **Search** allows the user to search for players, characters, and communities. This is how one would look up a real life friend or look a particular character.
- **Personals** are the personal ads, similar to those in a newspaper or Craig’s List. A user can create a personal ad to look for teammates for a quest, selling items, or

anything else she wants. Personal ads are tagged such that they can be filtered, for example by game.

- **Messages** is the page where the user reads and sends Alter Ego messages. Alter Ego can also be configured to forward messages on to the user's email address. A small icon appears on this button if the user has new messages.
- **Create** is where the user creates new character profiles and games. This is also where one can add customized profile fields.
- **About** contains the help pages, account cancellation, aggregate statistics about the sorts of people using Alter Ego (e.g. games, gender, age), and contact information for the site administrators. This is also where the Terms of Service can be reviewed.

## 4.2 Member Screen Elements

The screen elements which are always present whenever one views a member's page or their own home page, are the Games List, the Friends Box, and the Groups Box.

### 4.2.1 Games List

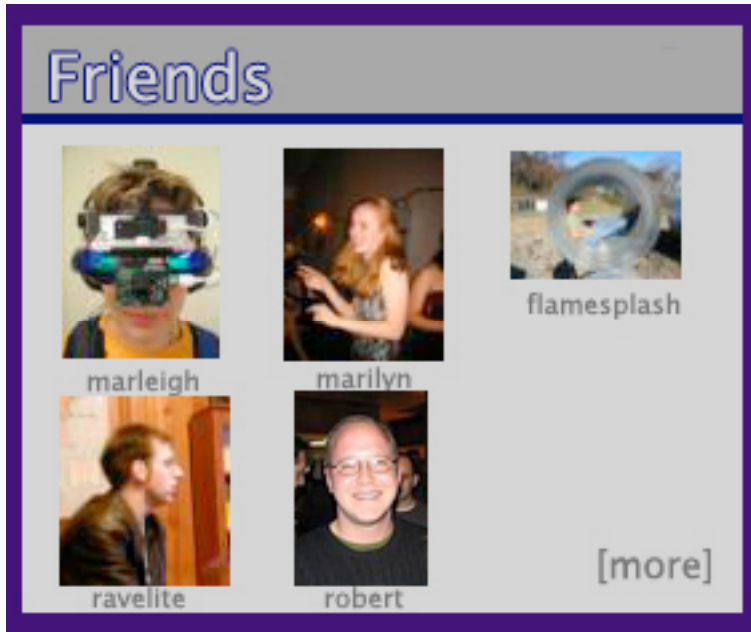
The Games List is a tabbed list of games running down the left hand column of the screen. The first element is the name of the member whose page is being viewed, with that member's games listed below. The member's characters associated with the selected game are listed beneath the game title when that game is selected. The character whose profile is on display is



**Figure 4: Games List**

highlighted.

#### 4.2.2 Friends Box

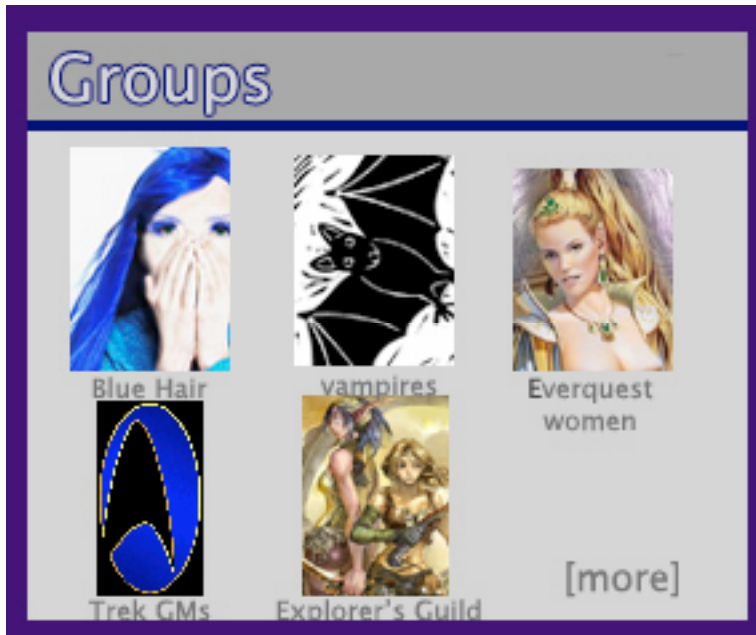


**Figure 5: Friends Box**

The Friends Box contains names and icons for six of the member's friends. It is located at the top of the right column on the screen. Clicking on an icon takes you to that particular friend's profile. To see the rest of the member's friends, or to add or remove friends if viewing your own Friends Box, click on the "[more]" button. There is also a shortcut to add a member as a friend above the Profile Box when viewing someone else's page. When adding a friend, you are given an opportunity to rate them as a gaming partner. Ratings are a five point scale ranging from 1 "No thanks" to 5 "One of my favorite people to play with," with a neutral default value of "We haven't gamed together much." These ratings are private, but are used in aggregate, anonymous form to provide

recommendations. Privacy settings can also be defined based on these ratings, for example, only allowing a user's favorite gaming partners to see her cell phone number.

### 4.2.3 Groups Box



**Figure 6: Groups Box**

The Groups Box looks almost identical to the Friends Box, but refers to communities instead of individuals. It is located underneath the Friends Box. Members can choose to join groups, which can help facilitate social networking. While there is no restriction on what sorts of groups can be created, it is assumed that most of them would be game related. An expected use would be to have Alter Ego groups that reflect in-game groups, such as guilds. Clicking on a group's icon takes you to that group's page.

Group pages are similar to member profiles in appearance, except they have "members" instead of "friends" and the Groups Box refers to similar groups set by the administrator of the group. Groups have forums where members can talk, and

administrators can also create announcements to be sent to the members. Announcements are described more fully in §4.3.3 Announcements Box.

Groups are created by one or more administrators, who are responsible for the group's profile, privacy, and membership settings. Groups are also affiliated with one or more games, or can be set as a non-game related group. This becomes important when filtering, which is discussed in §4.4 Profile Pages.

### 4.3 Home



Figure 7: Home Page

The Home page is what a member sees when she first logs in. In addition to the Main Screen Elements and the Member Screen Elements, there is also the Update Box, the Recommendations Box, and the Announcements Box.

### 4.3.1 Update Box

The screenshot shows a window titled "Updates" with a blue header. It is divided into two sections: "World of Warcraft" and "Everquest". Each section lists characters with their last update date and an "OK" button. Below each character name are fields for "level" (with a dropdown arrow) and "current quest" (with a text input field).

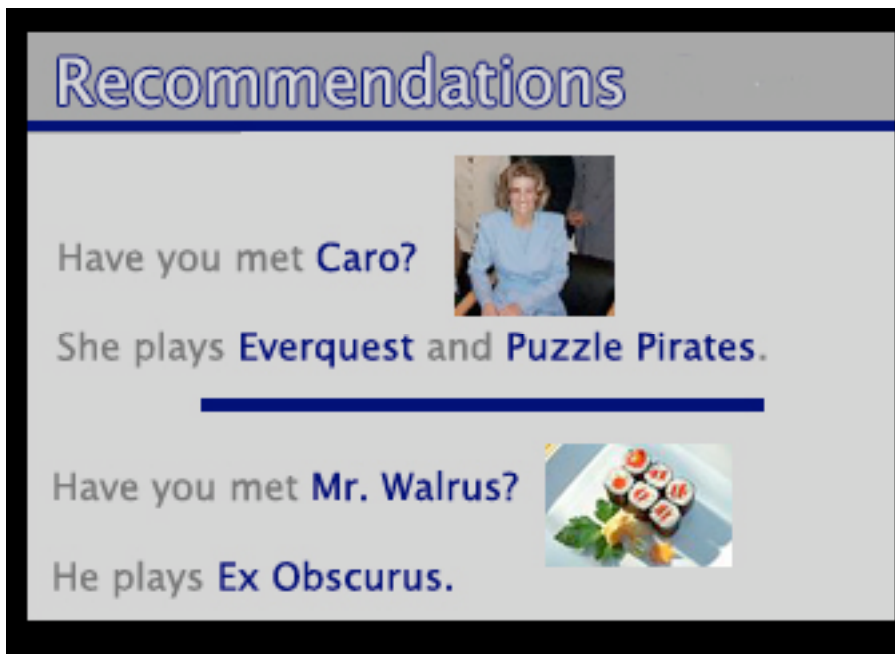
World of Warcraft	
Legolas	4/2/05 OK
level	42
current quest	Maurodon
Twix	4/2/05 OK
level	15
current quest	Goldshire
Azra	2/27/05 OK
level	3
current quest	Deadmines
Everquest	
Isannah	4/15/05 OK
level	15

**Figure 8: Update Box**

The Update Box is at the top of the center column of the screen. It is a summary of all of the profile fields which need updating grouped by character and with the “last updated” field noted by the character name. How often Alter Ego prompts the user to update a field is set by the user on a field by field basis. The user checks the information presented and updates it if necessary on a character by character basis. For example, the

information for Legolas is out of date, so the user changes the level to “43” and clicks the “OK” button. The last updated field and the information is updated. The user has not been playing Azra, so her information is still correct. She clicks the “OK” button without changing anything, which updates the last updated field.

### 4.3.2 Recommendations Box



**Figure 9: Recommendations Box**

The Recommendations Box is below the Update Box in the center column. This feature was inspired by recommendations features of Amazon and NetFlix, where the website recommends products based on the user’s past purchases and ratings as compared to the purchases and ratings of other users of the site. Such features try to determine the tastes of the user, and then offer products which were also used by those with similar tastes.



In the case of Alter Ego, we are trying to determine gaming compatibility.

Compatibility scores are calculated based on:

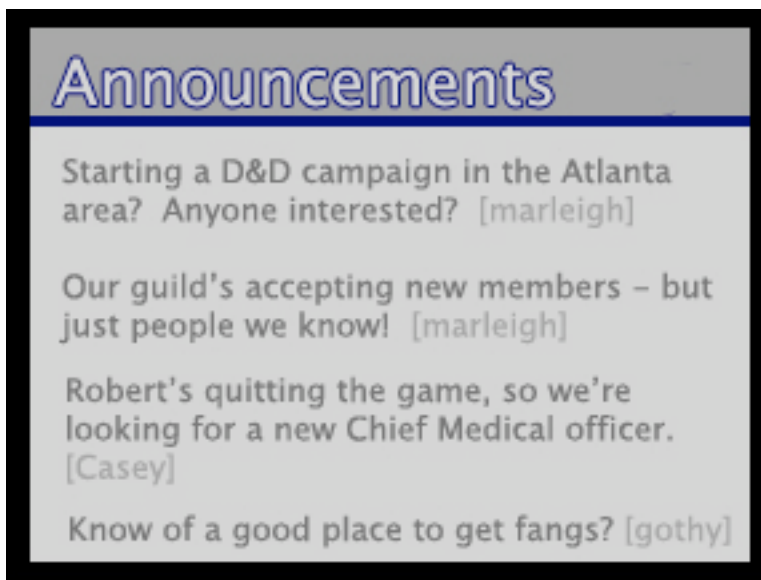
- The games the two users play
- The degrees of separation, weighted by how highly each person in the chain was rated. The idea here is that friends of friends are better bets for compatibility than strangers.

Using this score, a few people are recommended each time the user logs in to Alter Ego.

The recommendations change with each log in so that the content is current. One of the failures of this method is that a user with few games and friends will be harder to match with other gamers, but like all recommendation systems, it should improve over time.

Also, the recommendations are only suggestions. The user decides whether or not to introduce herself.

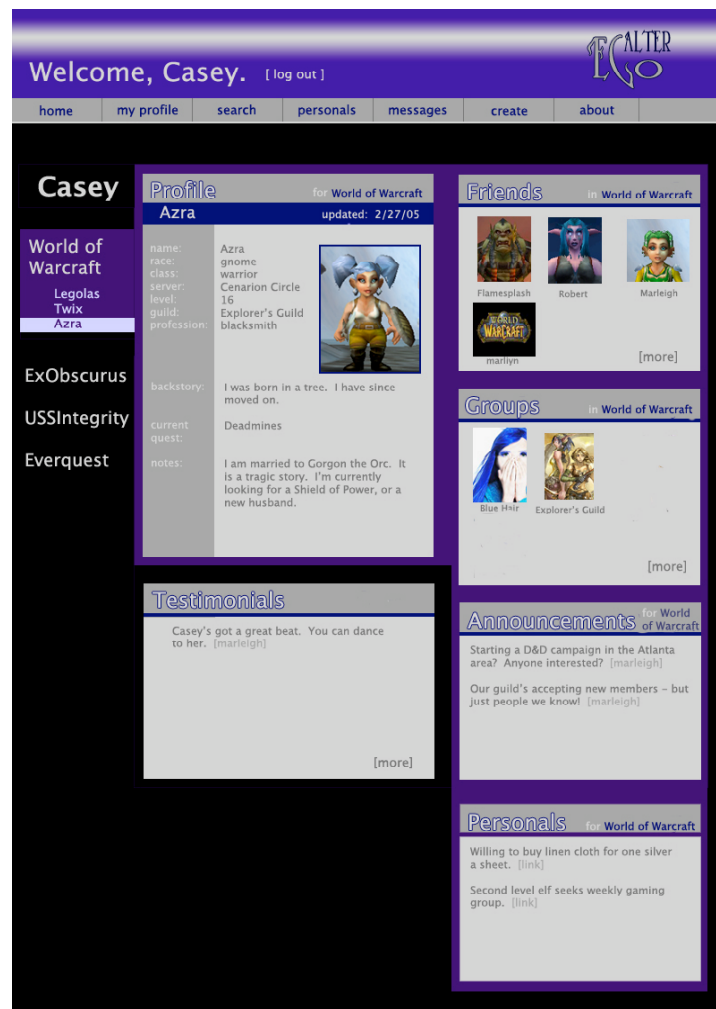
### 4.3.3 Announcements Box



**Figure 10: Announcements Box**

The Announcements Box appears under the Groups Box in the rightmost column on both the Home page and when viewing one's own profile. Friends can create "announcements," which are like messages except they are broadcast to a group of people. When creating announcements, the writer tags the announcement for being for a particular group of people, such as their list of friends, and with the relevant game, if applicable. This should help keep the number of irrelevant announcements down.

## 4.4 Profile Pages

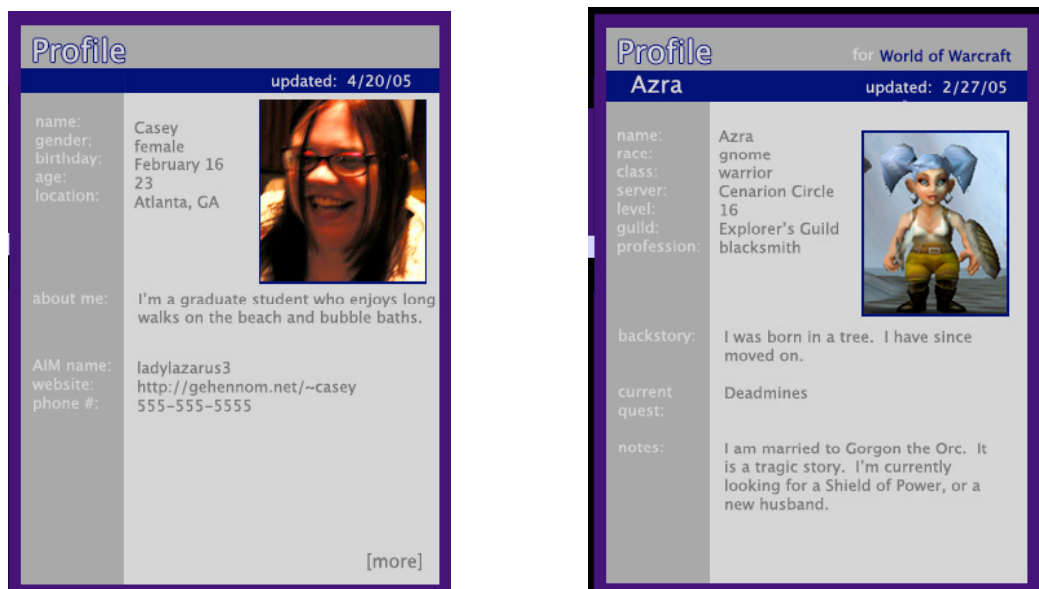


**Figure 11: Profile Page: World of Warcraft.** A second example is included in the appendix in §14.2 Profile Page: USSIntegrity

A Profile Page is what one sees if they click on “My Profile,” a friend’s icon, or a game in the Games List. Profile Pages include Main Screen Elements, Member Screen Elements, Profile Box, Testimonials Box, and Personal Ads Box. The Announcements Box also appears when the user is viewing her own profiles.

The user creates character pages for each of her characters, using the “create” button in the Button Bar. To access a character profile, the user clicks on the appropriate game in the Games List. Clicking on a game creates a filter over the Profile Box, Friends Box, Groups Box, Personal Ads Box, and Announcements Box (if shown). Only characters/friends/groups/announcements/ads related to that game are shown. Also, icons in the Friends Box change such that a picture of that friend’s character in the game is shown, instead of her main picture. To see the real world profile, or to see all friends/groups/ads, click on the top element in the Games List, which is the user’s name.

#### 4.4.1 Profile Box



**Figure 12: Two Profile Boxes – the player's profile (left) and a character profile (right).**

The Profile Box takes the place of the Update Box on the Home page at the top of the center column. It contains many fields which the user can choose to fill out. The only required field is “name,” though the user is welcome to use a pseudonym. Each field can have its privacy and update reminders set independently. Also, a user can create more fields if she wants to track some sort of information which is not a standard profile field. Another special case field is “last updated,” which is the date the user updated that particular profile most recently.

The user has multiple profiles, one for her real life and one for each character in each game. Certain fields are only relevant for certain types of profiles. Because of this, Alter Ego has standard templates to help the user get started. Also, users can contribute profiles tailored to specific games. For example, a template for Puzzle Pirates might change the label for “server” to “ocean,” and add a drop down menu field called “bilging skill.” Setting up templates properly is not intended as a beginner’s task. The idea is that good templates will become popular and poor ones will be neglected. Templates are selected when adding a character. All templates created for a game are offered, sorted by how many players are using them. Players can also switch templates later.

#### 4.4.1.1 Real Life Profile Template

<b>Name</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Update<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Privacy<sup>2</sup></b>
Name	Text (required, defaults to screenname)	Never	World

---

<sup>1</sup> Update refers to the default setting for how frequently the user is reminded to update this field on the Home page. It can be changed by the user.

<sup>2</sup> Privacy refers to the default privacy settings of who can see that information, which can then be changed by the user.

<b>Name</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Update<sup>1</sup></b>	<b>Privacy<sup>2</sup></b>
Picture	Image	Never	World
Gender	Drop Box: Male/Female	Never	Friends of Friends
Birthday	Date (only month and day shown)	Never	World
Age	Number, automatically calculated if full birthday given	Never	Friends of Friends
Location	Text fields for City, State/Province, Country	Never	World
About Me	Text	Never	World
Instant Message	Text	Never	Friends of Friends
Website	Text (URL)	Never	World
Phone Number	Text (number)	Never	Friends
Interests	Text	Never	World
Personality Quiz Answers <sup>3</sup>	Multiple text fields, one for each quiz	Never	World
Favorite Games	Text	Never	World

#### 4.4.1.2 MMORPG Profile Template

<b>Name</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Update</b>	<b>Privacy</b>
Name	Text (required)	Never	World

<sup>3</sup> Explained more fully in §4.5.3 Personality Test.

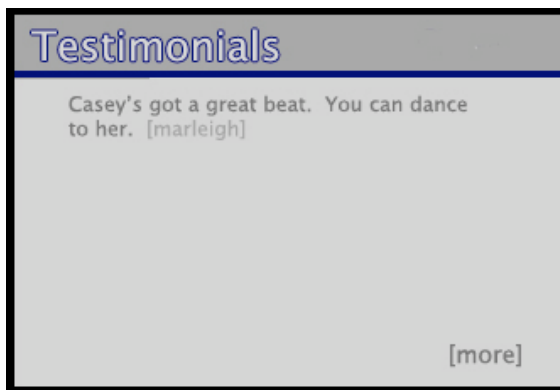
<b>Name</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Update</b>	<b>Privacy</b>
Picture	Image	Never	World
Server	Text	Never	Members
Gender	Text	Never	World
Race	Text	Never	World
Class	Text	Never	World
Level	Number	Once a Day	World
Guild	Text	Never	World
Skills	Multiple text fields	Never	World
Current Quest	Text	Once a Week	World
Home	Text	Never	World
Backstory	Text	Never	World
Notes	Text	Never	World

#### 4.4.1.3 Role-playing Profile Template

<b>Name</b>	<b>Value</b>	<b>Update</b>	<b>Privacy</b>
Name	Text (required)	Never	World
Picture	Image	Never	World
Gender	Text	Never	World
Birthday	Text	Never	World
Age	Number	Never	World
Race	Text	Never	World
Class	Text	Never	World

Name	Value	Update	Privacy
Level	Number	Once a Month	World
Skills	Multiple text fields	Never	World
Home	Text	Never	World
About Me	Text	Never	World
Interests	Text	Never	World
Personality Quiz Answers	Multiple text fields, one for each quiz	Never	World
Backstory	Text	Never	World
Notes	Text	Never	World

#### 4.4.2 Testimonials Box



**Figure 13: Testimonials Box**

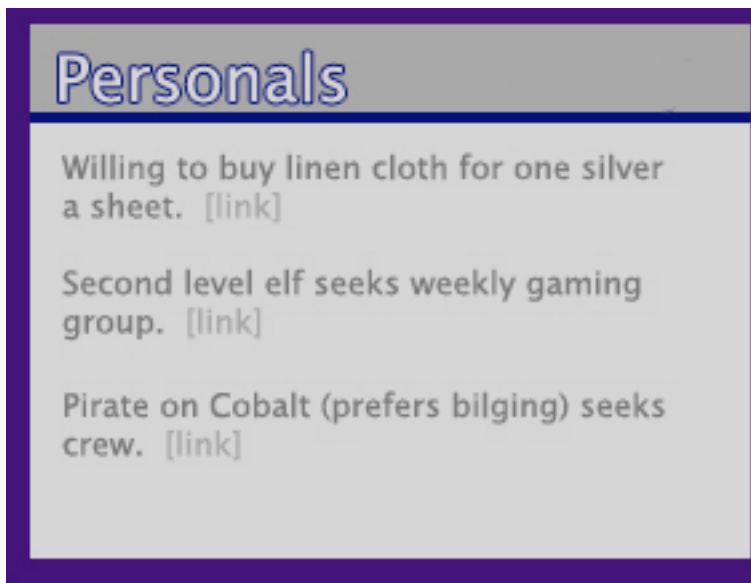
The Testimonials Box is beneath the Profiles Box in the center column. Members can write testimonials about other members of the site. Testimonials about a user will be displayed in this box on their profile page after they have been approved by that user.

While anything can be written in a testimonial, the intent is that they say something positive about the person as a gamer. For example:

*Casey is the greatest role-player ever! She's totally hysterical as Azra, her gnomish warrior pirate. Smite, yarr!*

This will appear on Casey's page once she has approved it.

#### 4.4.3 Personal Ads Box



**Figure 14: Personal Ads Box**

The Personal Ads Box is the last item in the rightmost column. It is a listing of the personal ads the user has placed. If the user has no personal ads, this box is not shown. This is expected to be useful when viewing other members' profiles (e.g. "Look, Casey needs a +5 sword. I'll send her one.")

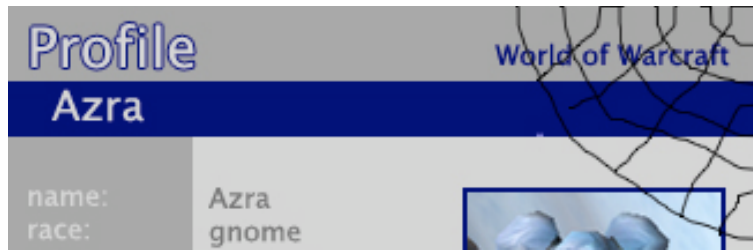
#### 4.5 Other

Other design choices were made that didn't fall in to other categories. These are listed here.



### 4.5.1 Cobwebs

Since the core of Alter Ego's content lies in the profiles, it is important that the profiles be up to date. While we cannot force



**Figure 15: Spiderwebs collect on out of date profiles.**

the user to keep her profiles up to date, we can cajole her. The Update Box is designed to make updating the profile as easy as possible. Another reminder we've designed are cobwebs. As profiles get older, they begin to collect cobwebs. This easily lets any viewer know that the information is probably out of date. A user can remove the cobwebs from her profile by "updating" the information, even if no information has changed.

### 4.5.2 Add-ons

One of the implementation decisions we made was to leave an open API for users to create third party software to use with Alter Ego. For example, a user might create an interface enhancement for World of Warcraft which uses information from Alter Ego to write a player's real name above her character's head, or she might create a tool to update her character's profiles on Alter Ego automatically.

An interviewee also suggested allowing users to create their own skins for their profiles in order to reflect their gaming interests.

### 4.5.3 Personality Test

An interesting trend we have noticed in our personal online communities is the popularity of personality quizzes. These quizzes are usually amateur and frivolous,

ranging from the “Which Chemical Element Am I Test” [12] to “Which Dysfunctional Care Bare Are You?” [16] Alter Ego has a profile field for the answers from these sorts of quizzes. It is included to be a sort of icebreaker to give members something to talk about. Members can add the answers to any quiz by using a special profile field which takes the name of the quiz, the URL, and the answers. In order to encourage use of the quizzes, we have decided to include a quiz with the site.

Our starter quiz is “The Bartle Test” [15], in which the test taker is rated along the four categories of achiever, explorer, socializer, and killer based on an article by Richard Bartle [1] examining the sorts of people who play adventure MUDs. The results of the test are of the following format:

*Your type is: **AKS**.*  
*Achiever: 66%*  
*Killer: 60%*  
*Socializer: 40%*  
*Explorer: 33%*

While neither Bartle nor the creators of the quiz are trained in personality assessment and Alter Ego encompasses more types of games than MUDs, it will hopefully be an amusing feature and be accurate enough to at least let a viewer know if someone is a killer, a type generally considered to make poor teammates. We do have some reservations about including the quiz as an implicit endorsement of the quiz and the Bartle categories. These reservations are discussed in §8 Social, Technical, and Political.

## 5 Third Places

One of the interesting aspects of this site is that it is not intended to be, in itself, a third place to its users; our goal is not so much to create a new community of people, a place where they can "hang out", but to support their interactions in *other* communities.

Here, the third places are those that have previously existed for our users – online role-playing games. These are the places they go for many of the benefits of third places, as outlined by Ray Oldenberg [13]: neutral ground, inclusion and general accessibility, a playful mood, the ability to keep a low profile, and the *potential* for conversation as a primary activity – different players play these games in different ways, of course, but Bartle's "socializers" would fit this description [1]. In any case, they can certainly fill the "home away from home" void that Oldenberg describes.

One of the most important functions of our site is the support the regulars in these role-playing communities by helping them to find each other in any online environment. As Oldenberg points out, "What attracts the regular visitor to a third place is supplied not by the management but by the fellow customers... it is the regulars who give the place its character and who assure that on any given visit some of the gang will be there" [13]. Our site gives these regulars a mechanism for making sure that "one of the gang" will be at their third place – or to find them again after a chance meeting.

In addition to supporting regulars' interactions with each other, it will also provide a way for newcomers to the games to become involved in the community. The "doom" of many third places mirrors the plight of many RPG newbies: "Seeking to gain respite from loneliness or boredom, they manage only to intensify those feelings by their inability to get anything going with one another" [13]. One of the major goals of this site is to

facilitate these users "getting with one another." If newcomers are able to connect with like-minded regulars in the games, it will not only help them to find their own niche, but it will increase the chances of them becoming regulars themselves and thus increasing the overall quality of the third place.

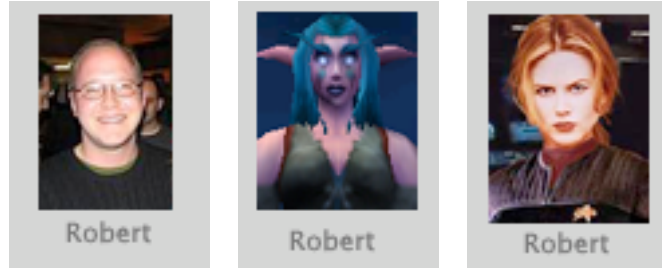
## **6 Design Factors**

The following design principles come from the "9 Timeless Design Principles for Community-Building" by Amy Jo Kim. [9] The following sections describe how Alter Ego does or does not follow these guidelines.

### **6.1 Purpose**

From past research and personal experience in online gaming, we saw a need for better tools to allow gamers to find fun people to play with. Our target audience is participants in online communities which involve characters. The main group Alter Ego was designed for is the MMORPG community. Other groups who may use Alter Ego are participants in avatar-based chat rooms such as LambdaMOO or Habbo Hotel. Alter Ego could also be used by players of collaborative writing style online role-playing games such as Play By Email (PBEM) campaigns or role-playing blogs, though we expect that such games would generally be added by people who are primarily using Alter Ego for MMORPGs and also happen to play these other types of games. One could also imagine Alter Ego being used by those who play action or strategy online games, though we explicitly chose to leave such people out of the target audience, since they would likely have different needs than players of character-driven environments and we needed to keep the project at a reasonable size.

Alter Ego's goal is to help online gamers find interesting people to game with through social networking across multiple games and communities. One of the main



**Figure 16: The many faces of Robert**

themes of the site is to connect people's avatars back to the original person. This is reflected in the graphic design, in which the friends list icons change to reflect the friend's main avatar for whatever game is being viewed.

## 6.2 Gathering Places

Alter Ego does not have gathering places per se, but it does have member defined sub-communities. This is discussed in §6.8 Sub-Groups.

## 6.3 Profiles

Member profiles are the main content of Alter Ego as discussed in §4.4 Profile Pages. The profiles are highly customizable, with the only required field being the "name" field, for which the user is welcome to use a pseudonym. Beyond that, the user may specify as much or as little information as she wants, with settings to restrict who may have what information. Updating profiles is designed to be fairly simple, with the most frequently updated fields summarized in a short web form when the user logs in for easy updating. As a more subtle encouragement to update, profiles that have not been updated recently acquire cobwebs, both letting any visitor know that the information may be out of date and reminding the owner that it's time for an update.

Alter Ego is viewable by non-members, though certain features such as sending messages are only available to members, and members may restrict profile information to be members only. The only personal information required to join is a valid email address.

## **6.4 Leadership**

As the administrators of the site will be handling technical support, there are no particular roles for users as hosts or mentors. The only positions of leadership will be those who are the "owners" of groups, which is discussed in §6.7 Range of Roles.

## **6.5 Code of Conduct**

The code of conduct of Alter Ego is the standard terms of service. As stipulated by the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998, the site will be restricted to users who are 13 years old or older since it requires an email address. [4]

## **6.6 Cyclic Events**

Alter Ego does not support any particular cyclic events. It is feasible, however, that individual users or groups could organize their own events, such as newsletters or contests, using the group forums.

## **6.7 Range of Roles**

This is discussed in a bit more length in the §10 Privacy and Access and §11 Participation and Lurking, but visitors to the site who are not logged in can basically "see but not touch". They have access to profiles and searching, but cannot send messages or otherwise interact with users. It should also be noted that "members only" or "friends of

friends only” is the default privacy setting for certain key profile fields, and users can choose to make any part of their profile invisible to non-users. New members have the same capabilities on the site as any other user. Anyone who is logged in can search, interact with members, create new groups, or take advantage of any of the rest of the functionality of the site.

The only users with any special power are those that start groups, as they maintain some ownership over them. The settings can stipulate that they must approve anyone who joins the group, or that only users invited by members can join the group. Adding a new game to the directory does not constitute this sort of ownership, however; once it is created it simply exists like any other game, where anyone can join.

## **6.8 Sub-Groups**

As discussed in more detail in the §4.2.3 Groups Box, groups are a large part of Alter Ego's functionality. Users can create groups for special interest that involve certain games, or even span across games. Any user can create a group, maintaining some ownership over it, and users can also search for groups based on a variety of criteria. The message boards within the group pages allow the members to interact freely, and as group icons show up on profile pages, they also help to form the user's identity.

## **6.9 Real World**

Alter Ego does not specifically support real life meetings or personal events; however, part of the purpose is to provide a way of connecting your real life persona to your online personas. Therefore, some might use it as a tool to set up real life meetings. The announcements feature allows them to make announcements of any type to their

friends. For example, someone might suggest starting up a Dungeons and Dragons campaign for anyone that lives in a particular city or announce an important life event such as a birth or a wedding. As a side note, if members have created such close bonds with each other that they wish to meet in real life, it will be a sign that Alter Ego is a success.

## 7 Identity

In *Life on the Screen*, Sherry Turkle points out the ability of the Internet to "give people the chance to express multiple and often unexplored aspects of self." In regards to a particular type of role-playing game, a text-based MUD, she suggests that they make possible "an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion" [16].

One of the fascinating things about role-playing games – particularly if you are participating in more than one – is that you really *do* have multiple identities. Maybe you are an elven sorceress in one game, a playful pirate lad in another, a red-haired student of the world with a penchant for pogo sticks in yet another, and a brown-haired graduate student in real life.

Those with whom you are interacting in these games may or may not have any information about your other identities beyond that of the one they are engaging in the game. One of the goals of Alter Ego is to give people the opportunity to link all of these identities together in one place, where they would have otherwise been completely disparate except in the head of their owner.

Our original idea with this site was to give people the means to specifically connect their role-playing alter egos with their real life identities. However, it is



important to remember that some people have no desire to reveal their real identities to the people that they meet online. Therefore, with the privacy settings and the customizable profiles, the users have complete control over how much of their "main" identity that they want to reveal. They have the choice to use their real name, but they could also use a pseudonym. Photographs are completely optional, as is other information such as gender, age, or race. Someone could use the site only for linking their different role-playing personas together, without really tying them to a "main" identity other than a pseudonym.

In many types of online communities, knowing the identity of the person you are communicating with is important for understanding the interaction. However, for role-playing games, this is not necessarily the case. Donath points out that communities such as newsgroups are intended to be non-fiction – the users are who they claim to be – whereas in the fantasy worlds of role-playing MUDs, this is not the case [6]. In role-playing games, the persona identities usually reveal very little about the player's actual identity. For example, gender swapping is especially popular, particularly men playing female characters [3]. However, there is a completely different expectation than there would be in other types of online communities; the people with whom you are interacting all know that you are playing a character, not yourself, and therefore whether your character is male or female in the game has little bearing on your actual gender.

The same is true for other identifying features such as race. There might be a big difference between comfort level in identifying your actual race as opposed to the race of your character in a game. After all, race is important in many types of role-playing games. Whether your character is an elf, a troll, a Vulcan, a Klingon – this is critical to

the interactions of the characters within the game. However, particularly in the case of MUDs, it has been found that the more removed a community is from role-playing and closer to pure social interaction, the less likely it is that your race will be a displayed characteristic [10].

Therefore, our users have the capability to provide as little or as much information about their multiple identities as they see fit – the important thing is that they are able to *connect* them to each other, as well as to see the connections in their friends' identities.

## **8 Social, Technical, and Political**

Alter Ego is a website which attempts to capture the subjective gaming preferences of its users in an objective manner. Players have many reasons why they prefer to play with particular people and not others. Alter Ego is intended not to judge these preferences, simply to facilitate the meeting of like-minded players.

While objectivity is a laudable goal, in practice it was difficult to attain for this project. In a class discussion of the PICS Internet labeling standard [14], Amy Bruckman made the point that while rating infrastructures can be objective, rating systems have built in values based on what they are designed to track. In the decision to include ratings in Alter Ego, we considered having multiple axes, such as role-playing, tactics, and combat. We were uncertain which attributes were important to rate, as we either would have to include all possible measurements or risk biasing the rating. In the end, we decided a simple one axis rating system was best, as it is quick and simple for the user to fill out, and by being so general, the rater can use her own criteria of what makes a person an

enjoyable gaming partner. We presume a person's rating criteria will be based upon values shared by her friends, and thus will have meaning within her social circle.

We also considered designing Alter Ego to be more of an infrastructure than a system, where all profile fields and search criteria were user specified. In this way, the users would decide for themselves what is important to know about a character. In practice, we decided this was not user friendly. We feel that starting the user off with a completely blank profile would be overwhelming, and so we added templates for what we thought would be basic information for particular types of games. While this list is data-driven based on our interviews and background research on current games and social networking sites, some of our values are included. For example, the "relationship" field found in many networking sites is not included, as we felt this would send the message that Alter Ego was intended to be a dating service. Similar logic went into the decision to make the gender field "friends of friends only" by default. Also, our personal backgrounds and research has been in role-playing games. As a result, the character profile includes "background," which many players might find superfluous, but not "N00B K111Z," which might be a way of tracking how many new characters one has killed.

When discussing arguments of whether technologies have inherent political attributes, Langdon Winner summarized one side as believing, "a given kind of technology is strongly compatible with, but does not strictly require, social and political relationships of a particular stripe." [18] For example, the Bartle personality quiz is not a required part of the system. It is intended as a frivolous toy, taking advantage of the popularity of amateur personality tests and giving the user a point of comparison to

decide if their gaming style is compatible with other users. Players who don't wish to use it can either ignore it or write alternative quizzes. In practice, it will probably be weighted more highly because of its official nature in being included in the site. The answers to the questions and the resulting classification of playing style may be given more credibility than it should. This may encourage a population who gets a particular rating judged by the community as being "good." Those who score "badly" or refuse to take the quiz may be seen as less desirable teammates.

A more subtle example of inherent socio-political relationships is in the possibility of game add-ons. Alter Ego is designed to allow for third party programs to collect and update information automatically. This would be most effective if one's online communities also allowed for a way to integrate with Alter Ego via third party software. For example, updating the level and current quest of a World of Warcraft character in Alter Ego is likely to be tiresome because of how quickly that information gets out of date. However, World of Warcraft was deliberately designed such that add-ons and interface modifications are easy to make. It would be fairly easy to create a program that automatically updates a player's Alter Ego profiles every time she logs out of World of Warcraft. Other similar games do not have this capability. One could imagine a situation where the capabilities of Alter Ego create stronger social ties in World of Warcraft than are possible in other games, which could then contribute to the greater success of World of Warcraft. In this way, games which allow modifications and add-ons would be encouraged by the adoption of Alter Ego.

## 9 Deviant Behavior and Governance

When asked about negative experiences with interacting with people in the game, one of our interview subjects told us a story about an experience when he first started playing Ultima Online. He had spent a good deal of time killing a spider inside a cave, and when he walked outside, feeling very accomplished, another much higher level player that was waiting outside immediately killed him. As his ghost floated away, the other player said, "Want to know why I killed you? I killed you because I hate this game and I don't care anymore!" Our interviewee indicated that one of the main things he would want out of Alter Ego would be a way to avoid players like this.

One of the inspirations of Alter Ego was a desire of participants in online communities to avoid deviant behavior. From past research and personal observation, it seemed as though most deviant players were repeat offenders. If a given player behaves poorly in Asheron's Call, it's likely he'll also behave poorly in City of Heroes. It seemed there ought to be some way to aggregate that information and do something useful with it for a player to protect herself from deviant behavior. How the player would be able to protect herself depends heavily on the specific online community and whether that community has any sort of built in process for dealing with deviance. Simple measures would include avoiding or ignoring a potentially troublesome person. For more extreme cases where the community has no official recourse, it might turn to some sort of vigilantism or shunning.

A core requirement for acting against deviant behavior is learning the identities of the perpetrators. In her book *Cyberville*, Stacy Horn describes cyberspace as "a revealing, not a transforming medium. Again, we are who we are." [8] While she was specifically

discussing a person's ability to grow as a person due to the influence of cyberspace, she makes a connection between the character played in a chat room and the person typing at the computer. If a character misbehaves, it is because a real person caused him to do so, and the person's other character incarnations will likely misbehave as well. Connecting avatars back to their players allows for greater accountability for a player's actions across multiple characters and games.

Another useful concept in thinking about the problem was Robert Axelrod's requirements for the possibility of cooperation (1984) as quoted by Peter Kollock:

1. Arrange that individuals will meet each other again
2. They must be able to recognize each other
3. They must have information about how the other has behaved until now

The first point is unlikely in a large online community. Many players only encounter each other once. We identified the last two points as being the most useful design problems. The feature in which characters are connected to each other as being played by the same person is the online equivalent of point 2. Players would be able to "recognize each other" regardless of their current character.

The most interesting design issue came in the consideration of point 3, in sharing information on how other players have behaved until now. To allow easy sharing of past negative behaviors, we considered the opposite of the friends list: the blacklist. Blacklists would be subjective, just like friends lists. Unlike friends lists, blacklisting a person meant that you didn't want to play with them anymore for some reason. Each blacklist entry would have a rating ranging from "I personally didn't care for him, but you might" to "Avoid at all costs!" Blacklists would be private, no one would know who was on your

personal blacklist, though the contents would be anonymously aggregated and presented to your friends as “warnings,” the opposite of “recommendations.” If you were to navigate to a profile for someone who a friend of yours had a bad experience with, you would see a warning.

We decided to drop this feature. It was difficult to weigh the needs of all parties. Users would probably feel uncomfortable with blacklisting someone unless it were anonymous. This might create a hostile atmosphere in which someone was blacklisted for personality conflicts which resulted in a whole group of people refusing to game with that person. Such a person couldn't correct the mistake, since he wouldn't know who his accuser was. We decided to focus on the positive instead, rewarding people for playing well with others and gaining friends.

## **10 Privacy and Access**

As with any site that displays information about its users, privacy is a major concern. As outlined in our design, there are several different ways that we are dealing with this issue, with much of the security customizable by the user and to suit their individual comfort level.

The only information that the user is *required* to give in order to sign up is an email address. This address, in turn, will only be visible to other users if they choose to put it on their profiles. This is one of the reasons that the profile templates are so highly customizable; we do not dictate what information users reveal about themselves, but rather they do. Internet users' comfort levels vary widely across different types of information; for example, a majority of people would not mind having their favorite food

or television show published on a website, but would be less comfortable with revealing their age, and even less so with revealing their full name or phone number [5]. When we showed our interview subjects the personal profile screenshot, three of them expressed concern at the fact that there was a phone number listed, and they indicated the specific fields for which they would use privacy settings. That is also why the site facilitates users communicating with each other through private messages sent via the site rather than email; if they choose to share their email addresses or any other personal information, that is their choice.

As with other social networking sites, a problem that users may encounter is stalking. In Alter Ego, even if a user is careful to keep her personal information private, it might still be possible for someone to follow and harass them across different games. Many of our privacy settings are in place to try to discourage this sort of behavior. For example, the default privacy setting of gender in a personal profile is 'friends of friends'; therefore, someone might not have much luck searching the site to find all of the "real" women. Stacy Horn described a user on Echo who engaged in this sort of behavior – picking out all of the women in the community – which ended in a real life stalking situation [8]. Amy Bruckman described a similar sort of behavior in her paper on gender swapping in role-playing MUDs; female characters are often the subject of unwanted attention due to male players pulling up a list of all of the logged on characters, searching it for female names, and then paging the characters [3]. This is the type of deviant behavior that we want to avoid, but ultimately it is up to the individual user if they want to reveal enough information in their profiles that would give someone the means to stalk them either across games or in real life.



Much like the security settings in Livejournal ([www.livejournal.com](http://www.livejournal.com)), our users will have the ability to choose who has access to certain information that they post in their profiles. They can set certain fields to be viewable only to their friends, for example, or friends-of-friends, or even set smaller groups of friends.

Another issue to be aware of is the privacy of children. According to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, personal information cannot be collected from users under the age of thirteen [4]. Since Alter Ego requires an email address to create an account, only those who are at least thirteen will be admitted as members. Most games also require that their players be at least thirteen, so we do not expect this will be much of an issue.

## **11 Participation and Lurking**

As the major benefit of Alter Ego is the ability to network, we don't feel that lurkers would gain much from the site. There are, however, a few lurking behaviors that the site affords. The first, of course, is stalking: these are the people that don't sign up for an account, never contact anyone on the site, and simply use it to find people in-game for some sort of inappropriate purpose. As just described, this sort of behavior can have privacy implications.

Lurkers who do not join the site will not have access to its full capabilities – they cannot send messages to users, post personals, etc. Basically, they are able to look but not touch. They will also not have access to profile information that users set as visible to "members only."

Aside from these lurkers with potential stalking behavior, there is the possibility of another behavior that could be considered a sort of lurking. Someone who creates an account may not participate in any further way on the site; that is, they don't initiate contact with any other members, participate in discussions, etc. However, someone who creates profiles for their game characters, even if they still do not participate farther in the site, are contributing something meaningful. There may actually be a lot of these "passive members" – after all, aside from interacting with other members, another use of the site may simply be to keep a record of all of your different role-playing characters. But by simply having them there, they are making the search space more accurate for other users, and then they have the option of responding or not if another user contacts them.

## **12 Conclusion**

In the early days of online communities such as Echo and the Well, the emphasis was on the real people. Users often knew each other's real names and met face to face at parties. They often had a pseudonym or an online identity, but the mappings were usually one to one. As the number of online communities has multiplied, so have the accompanying personas of the users involved. Now, it is common for those interested in online communities to have many avatars – during the course of this class each student acquired nine. Methods of managing these personas are needed in order to help people make social connections with the players behind the avatars. Alter Ego provides an environment in which to wade through the overwhelming number of characters to find gaming partners and friends.

## 13 References

- [1] Bartle, Richard (1996). "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs." Retrieved on April 19, 2005 from <http://www.brandeis.edu/pubs/jove/HTML/v1/bartle.html>
- [2] Bruckman, Amy (1996). "Finding One's Own Space in Cyberspace." *Technology Review Magazine* January 1996.
- [3] Bruckman, Amy (1993). "Gender Swapping on the Internet." Presented at The Internet Society, San Francisco, CA, August 1993.
- [4] "Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998." Retrieved on April 21, 2005 from <http://www.ftc.gov/ogc/coppa1.htm>
- [5] Cranor, Lorrie Faith, Joseph Reagle, and Mark S. Ackerman (1999). "Beyond Concern: Understanding Net Users' Attitudes About Online Privacy" in AT&T Labs-Research Technical Report TR 99.4.3.
- [6] Donath, Judith (1999). "Identity and deception in the virtual community" in Mark A. Smith and Peter Kollock eds. *Communities in Cyberspace*. Rutledge: London. pp.29-59.
- [7] Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Reprint Penguin Books, 1990.
- [8] Horn, Stacy (1998). *Cyberville*, Warner Books Inc.
- [9] Kim, Amy Jo (2000). "Community Analysis Template: 9 Timeless Design Principles for Community-Building." *CS3778B Newsgroup*. Retrieved on June 15, 2000 from <http://www.naima.com/CS377B/template.html>

- [10] Kolko, Beth (2000). "Erasing @race: Going White in the (Inter)face." In Eds. Kilko, B, Nakamura, L., & Rodman, G., *Race in Cyberspace*. Routledge: New York. pp. 213-232.
- [11] Kollock, Peter (1996). "Design Principles for Online Communities." Retrieved on March 8, 2005 from <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/kollock/papers/design.htm>
- [12] "OKCupid! The Which Chemical Element Am I Test." Retrieved on April 19, 2005 from <http://www.okcupid.com/tests/take?testid=10462132396003208006>
- [13] Oldenberg, Ray (1999). *The Great Good Place*. New York: Marlow and Company.
- [14] Resnick, Paul and James Miller (1996). "PICS: Internet Access Controls Without Censorship." Retrieved on April 18, 2005 from <http://www.w3.org/PICS/iacwcv2.htm>
- [15] "The Bartle Test." Retrieved on April 19, 2005 from <http://www.andreasen.org/bartle/test.cgi>
- [16] Turkle, Sherri (1995). *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Touchstone: New York.
- [17] "Which Dysfunctional Care Bear Are You? - Quizilla." Retrieved on April 19, 2005 from <http://quizilla.com/users/londonbelow/quizzes/Which%20Dysfunctional%20Care%20Bear%20Are%20You%3F>

- [18] Winner, Langdon (1988). “Do Artifacts have Politics?” in *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## 14 Appendix

### 14.1 Alter Ego Interview Guide

Bring:

- Tape recorder and tape. Test it ahead of time!
- Paper prototypes in folder (don't show until that part of the interview)
- Pen and paper, for your notes or interviewee to scribble on
- Unopened bottle of water for the interviewee, chilled if you have the foresight.  
The little snack shop by TSRB sells them I think
- Optional: minor bribe (Marleigh has copies of a game she got at GDC she was going to burn to disk and hand out.)

Boilerplate: Ad-lib, but major points

- Working on design of an online community targeted at people who are part of online communities with characters.
- We need you to be honest. Don't worry about hurting our feelings, we're tough.  
Besides, it's better for us to have you point out design flaws now when we can fix them, rather than have them found later by our professor.
- First we'll get some background info
- Then we'll be talking about your current communities

- Finally we'll be showing you some of our design ideas and ask for your feedback
- That being said, this is more of a conversation than an interrogation. If there are things you think of that you want to say, go right ahead. It's encouraged.
- We'd like to audio record the session. Is that all right with you? The recorder will be right there on the table. If you ever feel uncomfortable, just reach over and turn it off.
- We've scheduled 2 hours for this session. We probably won't use it all, but we may. In any case, there will be a lot of talking, so I brought you this *<hand them water>*
- I also brought a small token of appreciation. *<hand them bribe>*
- Thanks again! On to the study!

Notation:

- Always ask this
  - Follow up probes as needed

Always feel free to deviate from script to follow up interesting leads

Vital Stats

- Age
- Gender
- Occupation
  - Major, if student

## Online Communities

- Tell me about your online communities in which you have characters
- So your online communities with characters are *<repeat list>*?
- Tell me about any other online communities you are part of.
- Tell me about a typical session of *<game>*.
  - How do you choose who to interact with?
  - What do you do if your usual gaming partners aren't available?
- Tell me about a positive experience with someone you met in *<game>*.
  - How did you meet?
  - Have you interacted with them since?
- Tell me about a negative experience with someone you met in *<game>*.
  - How did you meet?
  - Have you interacted with them since?

## Social Networking Sites

- Have you used Friendster, Facebook, Orkut, or MySpace?
  - Which ones?
- Mind if we look at your page? *<Log in as yourself and pull up their page, thus sidestepping any privacy issues. If they have multiple, have them pick their favorite. If they don't have a page, show them your own Orkut page and ask the questions such that they're predicting their behavior>*
- Give me a tour of the important parts of the site. *<Have them drive, let them explore and talk aloud if they haven't used this before>*

- What is the purpose of this site?
- Does it meet this purpose?
- How did you come to be using *<foo>*?
- What do you like about it?
- What do you not like about it?
- How often do you log in?
- How frequently do you update your information?

### Alter Ego

- The site we're designing is called Alter Ego. *<show screen shot Casey logged in as Casey>*
- Someone named Casey logs in as herself and here is what she sees. What's your first impression?
- Describe what's going on on this page. *<Do all the usual interview tricks, like answering the question "What does this mean?" with "What do you think it means?">*
  - What is the purpose of this site?
  - *<Point out buttons at top. Ask what should happen when each is pressed.>*
- Click on World of Warcraft, which is the name of a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. What happened? Please describe all the changes. *<let them see the previous page again as much as they want, but only see one at a time, like in a real web browser>*



- Lots of “Why do you think that?” and “What is that for?” probes.
- Click on USSWhatsis, which is a small play by email Star Trek role-playing campaign. What happened? Please describe all the changes.
  - More “Why do you think that?” and “What is that for?” probes.
- Here’s the Casey page as viewed by herself and as viewed by Marleigh. What are the differences?
  - Last round of “Why do you think that?” and “What is that for?” probes.
- *<Show all the pages>* Now that you’ve gotten the tour, what do you think?
  - What is the purpose of this site?
  - What are some specific things you would use this site for?
  - What are its strengths?
  - What are its weaknesses?
- Drawing time! Now we sketch what this site would look like for you. *<Have them fill out the games column, their own profile, and profiles for one character from each game. Full descriptions aren’t needed, we’re mostly looking for the fields here. Only do one character if you’re running low on time.>*

#### Wrap-Up

- Anything else we haven’t covered?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Thank you!

## 14.2 Profile Page: USSIntegrity

The screenshot shows a web interface for 'USSIntegrity'. At the top, a purple header contains the text 'Welcome, Casey. [ log out ]' and the 'ALTER EGO' logo. Below this is a navigation bar with links: home, my profile, search, personals, messages, create, and about. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Casey**: A vertical sidebar on the left with links to 'World of Warcraft', 'ExObscurus', 'USSIntegrity', and 'Everquest'.
- Profile**: A section for 'Xenia' (updated: 11/2/04) with fields for age (25), species (Romulan/Orion Risa), height (5'10"), languages (Feringi, Bajoran, Klingon, Romulan), position (bartender), education (N/A), service record (2376-2378 Bartender, Starbase 211; 23780-pres Bartender, USS Integrity), background (Xenia was found as a newborn...), and physical profile (a mixture of features making her seem rather exotic...).
- Friends**: A section showing a friend named 'Robert' with a small profile picture and a '[more]' link.
- Groups**: A section showing a group named 'Trek GMs' with a group icon and a '[more]' link.
- Announcements**: A section with a message: 'Robert's quitting the game, so we're looking for a new Chief Medical officer. [Casey]' and a '[more]' link.
- Personals**: A section with the text '[add a personal?]'.
- Testimonials**: A section with a testimonial: 'Casey's got a great beat. You can dance to her. [marleigh]' and a '[more]' link.

Figure 17: USSIntegrity Profile Page

### **14.3 Who Did What**

We divided the work fairly evenly. Paper writing and the presentation were split by section and then merged. Casey was responsible for creating the screenshots and Marleigh arranged the logistics of all of the research participants. All in all, we feel it was a fair sharing of the work.