

# Never forget who you are, for surely the world will not: The impact of the quantity of identities in identifying with fictional characters

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Recent experimental research has found surprising findings of identification with fictional characters. While these findings are looking at how identification functions with different identities are interesting, it does not explore the effect of the quantity (rather than specific quality) of the fictional character's identities. This experimental research investigated if participants identified more strongly with a shallow fictional character or a richly defined one. The outcomes of the limited past research in this area are inconsistent with each other. Two hypertext fiction story games were used as an experimental stimulus, slightly modified for different participant groups. Almost 230 participants took part, and repeated measures ANOVA analysis was carried out. The novel results found good evidence that readers identify more with richly redefined characters. This has practical application for informing literary creation and challenges existing computer game design rhetoric. The lower identification of other/non-binary participants merits further study, but it may be practically challenging to recruit a sufficiently large number of participants.

Keywords: fictional characters; Game of Thrones; hypertext; identification; identity

In narratives across different media, readers are presented with characters to identify with. Understanding the mechanisms of identification is important to artistic creation because strong identification with characters is associated with the spectator's enjoyment and cognitive elaboration and predicts dramatic impact and impact on attitudes and beliefs (Igartua, 2010). When a game player identifies with a character, their self-perception is modified, so the player sees some character attributes as part of themselves (Klimmt et al., 2009). Understanding identification with fictional characters is also important because it may also generalise to understand identification and identity in the everyday world, which are practically difficult to investigate experimentally.

Cohen (2001) notes that in the humanities, identification lacks formal testing or conceptualisation. Oatley (1994) suggests identification refers to players/readers imagining events as if seen from the character's eyes with their cognitive and emotional responses akin to the character, but there seems little evidence that readers regularly engage in first-person viewpoint imagination.

In sociology, Holt (1950) discusses identification with a group, while in early psychology, Freud (2010, originally published 1923) regards identification as a primitive emotional attachment and Anna Freud (1992, originally published 1936) discusses identification with an aggressor. In social science, the focus on identifying with real people, objects, or constructed groups has led to a research gap in identifying fictional characters.

Recent experimental research has found surprising findings of identification with fictional characters. Hook (2019) used a hypertext fiction (HF) story game (Montfort, 2003) and found that women, but not men, identify more strongly with characters of their own gender. A follow-on experiment (Hook & Morys-Carter, 2020) supported this finding and also found no significant evidence in its primary finding that either atheists or Christians identify more strongly with a character of their own religion. This implies the concept of in-group bias from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1970) may not generalise well to the mechanisms of identification.

While these findings are looking at how identification functions with different identities are interesting, it does not explore the effect of the quantity (rather than specific quality) of the fictional character's identities. This is the topic of investigation here.

Burke & Stets (2009) defines identity as a meaning set that defines oneself, consisting of elements that fit into three categories: a holder of a role in society, as a specific group member, or as a holder of particular characteristics. Stryker (2017) notes these are internalised, not merely outwardly played. In this sense, it is possible to speak of a quantity of identities, the number of identities that one defines oneself by.

Shaw's (2011) qualitative interview findings suggest players will identify more strongly with characters who have many rather than fewer role identities. In contrast, Barton (2004) and McCloud (1998) argue shallowness makes it easier for players to place themselves into characters. Hence the current research base is limited, and predictions varied.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Participants were recruited by posting adverts on social media in *Game of Thrones*, gaming, and role-playing social media areas. It ran online for around two weeks in November 2015. A total of 228 responses were recorded, and all are included in this analysis.

Just over two-thirds (68%) of the participants identified as male, 27% as female, 5% as 'other/non-binary', and 1% preferred not to say. Most of them were from Europe (76%) or North America (17%). They were almost evenly split between those with no degree (35%), those with a science degree (31%), and those with an arts/humanities degree (34%). Half of them knew the main *Game of Thrones* story (50%), while another 35% reported they knew wider *Game of Thrones* setting material. Most (75%) had played three or more interactive fiction games, and almost two-thirds (64%) had many years of experience with tabletop role-playing games. While this was an artifice of recruiting participants to participate in an experiment involving playing an HF, it also meant participants had a general level of fluency with games that involve identifying with a character.

### Materials

The experimental stimulus was two short custom-written hypertext fiction (HF) story games, sometimes called 'choose your own adventure' games. In these stories, the reader reads a page of text then selects one from a series of hyperlinks to decide what the protagonist chooses to do in the story. These HFs were written for this experiment to prevent the participants from having any prior exposure; the researcher had additional creative writing qualifications. Using a fictional setting for these stories far from everyday life made it unlikely the participants would share any identities with the characters. The use of a famous fictional setting makes it more relatable and likely attracted participants, increasing the sample size.

These stories using setting from the *Song of Ice & Fire* series that started with *Game of Thrones* (Martin, 1996), from which the quote in the title comes. This setting has been used previously by many computer games, board games, and multiple tabletop role play games (RPGs). In both cases, the story game detailed a different original character, a knight travelling the land of Westeros to attend a tournament at the capital. The participants had six binary choices to make during the story about the protagonist's decisions.

## Design

The experimental design was similar to the method used by Hook (2019) and Hook & Morys-Carter (2020) and also coded using the Twine software for creating HF. The participants were assigned randomly to one of two groups. In addition, the sequence of the two stories was independently randomised.

One character was described only as a knight (a role identity) on the character briefing screens. The other character was described as a knight (a role identity), as loyal to a particular noble house (a group membership identity), and a believer in a particular fictional religion (a personal characteristic identity). Which character was described in more detail was switched based on which group the participant was assigned to. This was the only difference with the stories themselves being unchanged.

The dependent variable was identification with the character. Consistent with Hook (2019) and Hook & Morys-Carter (2020)'s experiments, this was captured by two seven-point Likert-type items: 'How strongly did you identify with [character name]?' and 'How strongly were you able to take on the role of [character name]?' were asked about both characters. The responses were averaged to lessen any influence of precise question-wording.

## Procedure

The story game was a series of webpages presented online with participants using their own devices in their everyday settings. This gave high ecological validity and enabled a diverse international mix of participants.

Data was collected by online form, and participants gave consent by completing the form and clicking the submit button. Potential participants could play through the story game and not take part by not completing or not submitting the form though it is unknown how many may have done this. An email address was given in case participants wished to withdraw later, and no one did this.

Participants were asked the two identification questions about each character and additional background questions such as their gender, broad geographic identity, education level, distractions while taking part, and *Game of Thrones* knowledge for possible secondary analysis. Names and other identifying data were not requested, so all data was anonymous. Data was stored with appropriate security, and ethical review and approval was obtained via the author's University's processes.

## RESULTS

As with the two-story experiment designs of Hook (2019), the two-story design used here means a complete replication of the experiment is built-in, independent except for using the same participants. However, unlike Hook (2019), this design had two somewhat alike characters so comparisons between stories could also be made. While this comparison across stories is perhaps slightly less valid in that the characters and stories are different, it is stronger for being within-participants. Means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1.

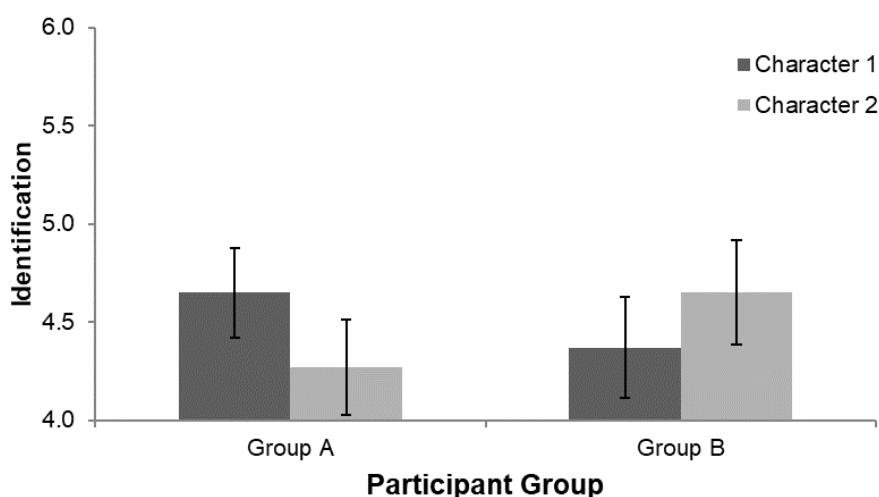
Table 1  
 Means (Standard Deviations) and the Number of Participants in Each Group

Character	Group A	Group B
Character 1	$\bar{x}$ 4.65 (1.24)*	$\bar{x}$ 4.37 (1.40)
Character 2	$\bar{x}$ 4.27 (1.31)	$\bar{x}$ 4.65 (1.46)*
<i>N</i>	113	115

\* Indicates where characters had three role identities on the briefing screen, rather than one.

The primary analysis used a repeated-measures ANOVA with the two characters as repeated measures and the participant group as the between-subject factor. All 228 responses are included. The combination of character and group was highly significant  $F(1, 225) = 11.401, p < 0.001$ . This is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1  
 Estimated marginal means



### Exploratory analysis

Further analysis was applied using data based on the secondary questions.

Gender was looked at due to previous research findings in this area. Means for males and females are very similar. While the means for the 'other/non-binary' participants did appear much lower, caution is needed due to this group's small size. Details are shown in the table below. Repeated measures analysis based on gender did not produce significant results.  $F(2,223) = 0.425, p = 0.594$

Table 2  
 Means (Standard Deviations) Split by Gender Identity

Character (n)	Character 1	Character 2
Female (61)	4.42 (1.39)	4.46 (1.53)
Male (154)	4.62 (1.25)	4.50 (1.33)
Other/Non-binary (11)	4.09 (1.41)	4.45 (1.21)
Prefer not to say (2)	1.50 (0.707)	1.50 (0.707)

This lack of significant gender difference at first glance could be seen to contrast with the finding of Hook (2019), which was that females identify more strongly with a female character and males identify equally regardless of character gender. However, it can be seen as consistent with this prior finding by reflecting on the nuance that females do not identify less strongly than males with a male character but merely do not gain the identification boost they would have if they were female.

Linear regression was carried out, including gender, whether the participant is a native English speaker, their education level, and *Game of Thrones* knowledge. None of these were significant, which was a strong contrast with the significant finding for participant groups in the main analysis.

## DISCUSSION

This study has found good evidence with some highly significant results that the number of role identities does impact on the strength of identification with that character. It should also be noted this effect was found with merely a couple of extra sentences on a character briefing screen at the start. It would seem reasonable to speculate that if the roles had been actively referenced or explored in the story, the effect might have been even stronger.

### Reflection on the method

This experiment has continued to develop the new experimental method first published in Hook (2019), with the additional complexity of a built-in replication that enables between-participant comparisons. It demonstrates the practical use of a novel game as an experimental stimulus. For a wider discussion of digital games as an experimental stimulus, see Järvelä et al. (2014) and a discussion of classic experiments as games, see Hook (2012).

Aside from the tradition in Social Identity Theory, the use of experiments is also unusual in studying identity. This experiment also demonstrates the experimental method's application to identity by investigating the related topic of identification. It also demonstrates applying the experimental method of testing hypotheses to the game studies discipline which has been dominated by other methods.

### Practical applications of the findings

Many digital games have included protagonists who are generic 'everyman' figures (e.g., *Half-Life* by Valve Corporation, 1998) or who start the game with amnesia (e.g., *Planescape: Torment* by Interplay Entertainment, 1999). In contrast, this research suggests more distinctive characters with multiple role identities would increase identification with that character and enjoyment.

Considering this finding in the context of role-playing games in which players make their own characters (e.g., tabletop RPGs, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*), this finding suggests they can be improved adding a step in the process of character creation to prompt defining multiple identities for the character. It also implies that playing characters grounded in a society with many identities leads to greater identification than playing outsiders such as 'adventurers.'

There might also be applications for other fields. For example, presenting multiple identities of a celebrity or politician to potential followers might strengthen the sense of identification with them.

### Implications for future research

This research has produced good evidence that richly defined characters with multiple identities rather than shallow characters produced stronger identification, providing evidence supporting Shaw's (2011) interview findings. It would be interesting to explore with further experiments how far this goes. We might expect that adding more identities will not produce a further effect after a certain saturation point. There may also be some personal differences in how many identities about a fictional character the reader can mentally manage, similar to the personal differences in the number of digits held in short-term memory.

The lower identification of other/non-binary participants merits further study, but it may be practically challenging to recruit a sufficiently large number of participants. This is consistent with Hook (2019) where the data was suggestive of them being a distinct third group, if also too few to provide good evidence of this.

This research has also explored a more complex variant of the design and analysis that included not just replication but also within-participant analysis comparing the same participants with two different characters. The results of this approach seem consistent with the results of the between-participant analysis, so this variant design should be considered as an option in the design of future experiments. While this does require more work in writing the story and coding the hyperlinks, it does produce a dataset that enables richer significant tests.

## CONCLUSION

This research has applied a new experimental design variant to further explore identification with fictional characters and extend its scope from specific identities to the topic of how the quantity of identities affects the strength of identification. This is a topic where previous research is limited and there is no clear expectation from past research in which direction the outcome will be. It is also extended that design with a more complex and richer variation that included within-participant comparison for the first time.

This online experiment produced data from a large international pool of participants, diverse in many ways but slanted towards experienced gamers fluent in taking on the role of characters in games. The repeated measures ANOVA analysis found unpredicted yet very highly significant findings ( $P < 0.001$ ) that more richly defined characters with additional identities produce stronger identification than less well-defined shallow characters, even when the change is as minor as a couple of extra sentences on a briefing screen at the start of the story. This is very strong evidence in a situation where the expected results were unclear. No significant gender differences were recorded which fits with the nuance of previous findings on the topic of own-gender bias in character identification that males and females identify equally strongly with a male character. It also found that the range of other variables about the participants did not produce significant differences. It also found that the range of other variables about the participants did not produce significant differences, which makes the headline finding even more striking.

Aside from the academic importance in advancing scientific understanding of the mechanisms of identification these findings have direct practical application for human activities where building audience identification with a fictional character is relevant, which might include artistic creation of games, films, and written text. As noted, higher levels of identification are believed to increase enjoyment, cognitive elaboration, dramatic impact and impact on attitudes and beliefs. These findings might also apply to other activities that seek to build identification with another, such as promoting a celebrity or gathering support for a political leader. The secondary findings also indicate the unimportance of other factors and highlight the potential research topic of non-binary participants as distinct third group.

These findings inform the design of future experiments in this tradition, in that they stress the importance of ensuring an equal quantity of identities between characters to maintain the validity of the comparison, unless that is the topic being researched. It further demonstrates how identification can be tested experimentally. This more complex design using two stories about comparable characters that enables the analysis to include both within-participants and between-participants analysis better informs the design of future experiments by showing the practical application of this more complex design variant.

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