Stories of Stigma and Acceptance
Using the Chimeria Platform

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People categorize each other in many avenues of our lives; these categories also play out in our fictions and games. For example, within role-playing games (RPGs), racial categorization is often used to trigger reactions when conversing with non-player characters (NPCs). However, in most such narratives, category membership is determined in a simplistic fashion in which members are slotted into boxes with no possibility for identities moving between the center or the margins of social groups. These deficiencies are particularly visible when trying to create expressive stories that can evoke nuanced phenomena such as social stigma. This paper presents our steps toward enabling interactive narratives more aligned with the social critiques by writers such as Octavia Butler or Samuel R. Delany than the uncritical play of identity in many mainstream computer role-playing games.

We implemented the Chimeria† platform to model social categorization phenomena including the movement of members within and across social categories [1]. By implementing a system based on a theoretical framework encompassing sociology [2-4], cognitive science [5, 6], and computing [7-9], we provide a platform for modeling social group membership with greater critical awareness.

Here, we focus on two Chimeria-built applications called Chimeria:Gatekeeper and Chimeria:Music-Social-Network.

![Figure 1: Screenshots from Chimeria:Gatekeeper (left) and Chimeria:Music-Social-Network (right).](image)
The *Chimeria:Gatekeeper* scenario is designed as follows. The player wants to gain access to the inside of a castle. To do so, it is necessary to convince a guard NPC that she or he can “pass” as a member of an accepted social category. The PC is a “stigmatized” category member and the guard is an “accepted” category member. The stigmatized category is defined as a race stereotyped as tall, well-spoken, wearers of fine clothing. The accepted category is defined as a race stereotyped as short, plain-spoken, wearers of rough-spun clothing. Player choices within the conversation shift the NPCs internal model of the PCs membership with respect to the two categories, bringing the player closer to or further from gaining access. However, rather than simply encouraging players to “pass” as accepted in order to win, the game narrates the internal thoughts of the PC to emphasize trade-offs between gaining access and the loss of self that can occur in trying to pass. *Chimeria:Music-Social-Network* narrates a similar tale of movement between social groups, however rather than a fantasy setting, the story takes place on a social network for music sharing. The system is tied into Facebook, Youtube, and RoviCorp Services (the All Music Guide engine,) drawing upon real user preferences, musical clips, and descriptors of genres, themes, and mood associated with musicians at runtime.

![Diagram of narrative structure](image)

Figure 2: A sample narrative in *Chimeria:Gatekeeper* is structured as a conversation with menu options for the player to choose between.

The narratives above demonstrate ways that *Chimeria* enables more expressive and socially nuanced conversations related to social identity in games. We do so seeking to develop more expressive forms of computational narrative capable of evoking pleasures and pains associated with social identity and all of its associated illusions.

**Works Cited**


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1 The conversation engine for the scenario called Chimeria:Gatekeeper is accessible for testing here: [http://groups.csail.mit.edu/icelab/chimeria-gatekeeper/conv.html](http://groups.csail.mit.edu/icelab/chimeria-gatekeeper/conv.html)

The scenario called Chimeria:Music-Social-Network, also built using the Chimeria platform, is accessible for testing here (click the “Launch Application” button to run it): [http://groups.csail.mit.edu/icelab/content/chimeria](http://groups.csail.mit.edu/icelab/content/chimeria)