

Real Heroes Don't Always Wear Skates: Alter Egos in Roller Derby

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Women's roller derby is a unique sport in many ways, including the athletes taking on an alternate persona or alter ego. When considering an alter ego, there are many questions a skater may consider when choosing and, thus, revealing their new identity to the public. This article will explore the history of the sport and how the components of the genre of the alter ego continues to shift while applying the theory of cultural-historical activity theory, or CHAT, to see how the production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology have shifted over the last 80 years to become what we now know as the alter ego in modern women's roller derby.

How They Roll: What Exactly Is Roller Derby?

Before diving in, it might be important to understand the general rules of the sport. Flat track roller derby is a played by two opposing teams, with five skaters allowed on the track from each team wearing quad skates and protective gear. Each team has four blockers on the track and one jammer. The purpose of the game (or "bout," as each individual match is called) is for the jammer to lap and pass the opposing team's blockers and jammer to receive points. The bout is composed of two thirty-minute halves consisting of two-minute jams. During the jams, the jammer and blockers are constantly switching between offense and defense to advance their jammer, but also to block the opposing jammer from passing and scoring more points. This requires coordination and a tremendous amount of teamwork and diligence. Within the sport, each individual team member goes by an alter ego or alternate name. Usually the name is a play on words and very personal to the individual, but more on that later. The sport did not always look this way and took over eighty years to get to what we know as modern roller derby.

History of Roller Derby

Women's roller derby origins are a much different species than roller derby today. Some of the earlier skating races, considered roller derby at the time, debuted in the 1920's ("WFTDA History"). Early derby began in 1935 on a banked track and acted as a filler at the Chicago Coliseum, featured a man and woman, and debuted with the promoter, Leo Seltzer, worrying that "the mainstream press would not consider his sport legitimate or worthy of their coverage" ("Roller Derby Timeline"). Fortunately, roller derby became popular for several decades. The heyday of early derby was in the 1940s to 1960s, fizzling out in the late 1970s. There were attempts to resuscitate the sport in the '80s and '90s with extreme gimmicks and storylines (think pro-wrestling), and it did catch on nationally ("WFTDA History").



Figure 1: "Ma" Bogash

One thing to note is that early roller derby did not put an emphasis on the alter ego. While some teammates and coaches had nicknames, the derby name craze that has become a cultural phenomenon was not center stage. For example, early skaters are listed on the Roller Derby Hall of Fame website as having names like Josephine 'Ma' Bogash, Midge 'Toughie' Brasuhn, Charlie 'Specs' Saunders, Arthur 'Buddy' Atkinson, SR., and 'Wild' Bill Reynolds, just to name a few ("Original Hall of Fame Members"). Figure 1 features one of the Hall of Famers, "Ma" Bogash, and emphasizes her nickname. Other skaters were listed with their "normal" daily names.

Modern Day Roller Derby

Modern roller derby began in the early 2000s with the emergence of the Texas Rollergirls. As the banked tracks and roller rinks of the past took time and money to build and develop, the Rollergirls adopted the flat track as only a large flat space would be needed to play ("WFTDA History"). According to the WFTDA (Women's Flat Track Derby Association) league information web page, there are now "404 full member leagues and 54 apprentice leagues" in Illinois, alone, having six WFTDA sanctioned teams ("WFTDA Leagues"). Over the last ten years, popularity has been gaining in smaller

cities and communities. Due to the surge in popularity, there are several “local teams” within a 50-mile radius of Bloomington, such as Twin City Derby Girls in Champaign, Capital City Hooligans and Midstate Mayhem in Springfield, Peoria Push in Peoria, and Soy City Rollers in Decatur, just to name a few (“WFTDA Leagues”). The women, and men, run the operation from within. Dues, countless volunteer hours, and a supportive derby community within the city help the team thrive.

The Importance of the Alter Ego in Modern Derby

Part of the excitement of women’s roller derby is the concept of these everyday women shedding their day jobs and becoming someone else. As seen in Figure 2, the women featured on the Twin City Derby Girls website are part of the fittingly named “Alter Egos” and “Evil Twins” teams. The



Figure 2: Screenshot taken from the Twin City Derby Girls website. Names include: Harmagedon, Chomps-Elysecs, Barclin' Monroe, La Jam Nikita, Brass Monke, Mitchell Mayhem, Cadmium Crusher, Natty Slice, Sloan Cold, Bricks Hithouse, Vanilla Thunder, and Tank.

derby league in the Champaign-Urbana area had a play on words with the levels of their teams to show the importance of the dual lives these women lead (“Dead Ringers & Alter Egos”).

There have been several articles about the “average” every-day woman becoming a superstar athlete by night. One article from San Jose’s *Mercury News* focused on just this aspect. The author referred to the players by their aliases alone, noting that “Linsday LoHanded . . . Terribelle Demise, Angel of Mourning, Bandita and Lady Kiss-off” are “teachers, secretaries, and mothers” when not skating (Carvey). Another local article to Australian derby fans is titled “Roller Derby Skates Bring Out Alter Ego” and focuses on a male derbyer, “Stiff Richard,” and his girlfriend, “Candy Contusions” (Cunningham). Both articles highlight the humble origins of teams just starting out and highlight the heroic perseverance of the athletes to band together and promote their sport.

Another article from a website called *The Cauldron* said it best when talking about the ferocity and ego an alias can have. The author notes, “these tags are like noms de guerre—names warriors once used to feel more ferocious in battle—or alter egos” (“The Power of Roller Derby Skate Names—The Cauldron”). The idea of being someone else or playing a role transforms the skater from a lady on skates to a warrior ready for battle, and derby is definitely a battle. Players create a new identity, carefully crafted with their own personality, team, audience, and even family in mind. The “correct” derby name for that player can shape the audience’s perception of just how terrifying they will be out on the track. Choose incorrectly and the identity of the skater may become lost and confusing to themselves and others.

Let’s CHAT About Roller Derby

When we think about why genres change or alter over time, we have to think about all components that make up the genre. One could apply **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)** to modern roller derby to look at how the idea of the alter ego in roller derby has taken a much more prominent role. First of all, what is CHAT? To be brief, CHAT “refers to a set of theories about rhetorical activity [how people act and communicate in the world] . . . that help us look at the how/why/what of writing practices” (Walker 71–72). According to Walker, there are seven terms used when thinking about how to apply CHAT to literate activities: production, representation, distribution, reception, socialization, activity, and ecology (Walker 74–76). Let’s break down some of the literate activities within the roller derby system using CHAT to understand the complexities of the alter ego.

Production: How are literate activities like derby names produced? Many times, derby names take time, wit, and an ability for deep self-reflection to produce. The names range from non-fictional and fictional characters, books references, music, video games, and much more. All WFTDA sanctioned players must register their names. No two names are exactly the same; however, when looking at the roller derby taxonomy poster from names registered in 2015, there are some similar references with slight discrepancies: “Coll of Duty” versus “Call of Derby” (“A Graphical Taxonomy of Roller Derby Skate Names”). Figure 3 below focuses on separating the taxonomy of famous derby names based on music, books, people, and tech, to name a few.

Representation: There are roller derby forums, websites, blogs, and even an official Facebook page dedicated to all things derby. Questions are posted almost daily where new derbyers ask “How do I choose my name?” Again, this is not something to be taken lightly. Once the programs are made, the jerseys are made, and it costs money to change a name. So, people do research, navigate Facebook, look at puns, maybe even ask some friends and family before the name is selected. This may also fit into the active part of the literate activity of choosing a name, due to others being involved in the process, as well as the athlete taking time and possibly modifying the name before settling on their derby name for life.

Distribution: In a community with a local derby team, there is a good bet that in a bar, restaurant, or even yoga class you will find bout posters on their bulletin boards. Pictures of the skater with their alter ego are on the posters and in the programs passed out to audience members. Based on the image of the athlete, coupled with their name, the audience makes quick work in deciding which athlete they will root for during the bout. The audience must proceed with caution, however, as many names can be deceiving. The jersey is another place the derby name is distributed. Typically, the athlete will have as much of the entire name as possible on the

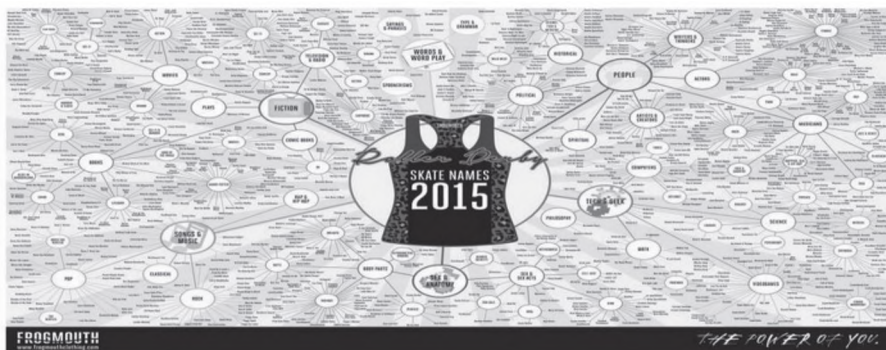


Figure 3: This poster (for sale for \$20) is from the FrogMouth website (a retailer for derby apparel).

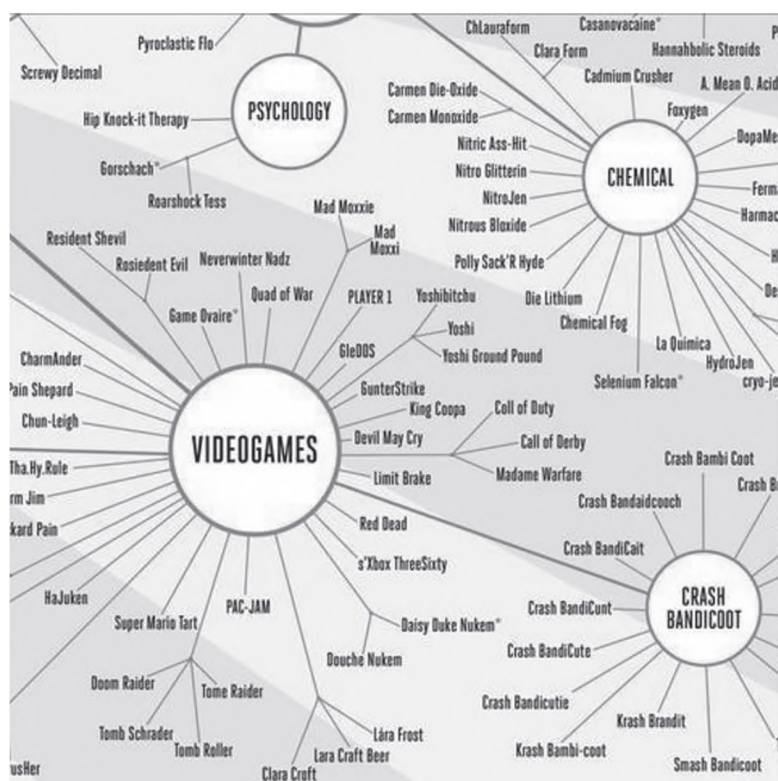


Figure 4: This is a zoomed in portion of the poster on the previous page. Here you can see the taxonomy of the names connected to videogames.

back. When a player has a name where the entirety will not fit, it will need to be shortened. At times, even that can cause a play on words.

Reception: Derby names can be tricky in the reception of the audience. The section on distribution briefly mentioned the audience's reception of the derby name and how that affects who they are intrigued by and will want to cheer on during the bout. At times, derby names can unfortunately have a negative impact, depending on the audience reception. Sometimes the name is too political, pushes the boundaries too far, or is a not so subtle sexual reference that makes someone feel on the edge of saying "Can they say that at a family friendly venue?"

Socialization: As mentioned before, the alter ego is empowering to the athlete, but it also keeps the audience coming back for more. The audience asks questions like: Will "Bruisie Quaddro" live up to their name again? Or, will "LL Kill J" take down "Biggie Brawls"? Roller derby teams are smart about their marketing, play on words, and use of community to thrive. The derby names help with a sense of camaraderie within the derby community.

One question asked when skaters from opposing teams meet for the first time is often, “What’s your name?” Ironically, many skaters spend countless hours with teammates and opponents, sometimes never knowing their real names. Facebook friends from years past pop up on a skater’s feed, making them pause, wondering, “Do I know them?” only to realize, of course! That’s my derby friend and teammate.

Activity: The process of creating a name can fall under activity. But other factors like trying to register a duplicate name and/or wanting to change a derby name (due to changes in life or negative reaction from audience members, for example) fall under the process of activity. The name itself can be an activity, as it is moving from the skater’s own perception or *reception* of their identity, as well as the audience’s. The name has movement through word of mouth, distribution on posters, or in pop culture.

Ecology: The venue and all components that go along with a bout can enhance or deter a derby name. For example, if you have a large venue with access to suicide seating (where audience members sit on the floor near the rink at their own risk), the audience will chant names of their favorite players, boosting the confidence of the athlete. However, if the venue is closed off, the audience and skater participation is minimal, with both parts missing the interaction of the skater high-fiving before and after the bout. The announcers, also part of the ecology of the bout, can really emphasize the skater’s name, thus making a hero or even enemy.

The Crossover of Literate Activities

The crossover is not just a basic skating technique. Looking at some of the literate activities within the alter ego, it is easy to see that CHAT is complex, and these activities work together closely and are very dependent on one another; therefore, each can cross over and deeply influence the other. For example, when choosing a name (located in the representation section), having a community of people giving the skater feedback on proposed names can influence her final decision. This specific component of the alter ego has now become part of the socialization of alter egos. Another example of cross over is the derby poster of taxonomy names. What I used to illustrate the production of a name, one could argue, has now become part of the distribution, ecology, socialization, and even activity surrounding alter egos, as it is being shared on websites and hung on walls in its poster form. Ultimately, any time there is a flux or shift in one part of CHAT, there can be a change in the other parts. Much like a jammer jumping an apex and weaving through blockers to score extra points during the jam, the skater

must understand the flux the alter ego will incur. By applying CHAT, we are able to see how intricate the alter ego is to the skater, the audience, and, potentially, the history of roller derby. It takes the skater from the center and moves her to an interesting position in which something she originally had 100% control of is no longer only hers.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the athlete has an interesting dynamic. How does one gain control of something they may no longer be the center of? How does CHAT alter the athlete's perception of their alter ego? At times, there is a pressure to give the audience what they want. This is what every entertainer wants to do. But what about the performer? How is their identity compromised when they become an alter ego? Is this something they want, the audience wants, or all of the above? By looking at alter egos through a CHAT lens, I think it is safe to say that the identity of the skater is not lost, but they are no longer at the center. The name shifts from being something very personal to the skater to something owned by the audience. As my CHAT analysis has shown, the author of an alter ego is decentered from the literate activity of alter egos. This is not necessarily a negative thing for the skater. In fact, it may be beneficial to the skater to create a name with CHAT in mind. The next time you are at a roller derby bout, cherish and appreciate the wit, sweat, and intellect that went into the alter ego. And, remember, be supportive of your local teacher, doctor, or store manager who lives a dual life, as real-life heroes don't always wear skates.

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