

Performing Themselves:
Women's Identity Strategies in Male-Typical Video Game Spaces

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Abstract:

Video and computer games are currently a male-typical marketplace; the games are designed by, created for, and marketed to men and boys. In reaction to this, a girls' games movement has sprouted that seeks to create titles for young women. The separation of the industry is problematic, as is the inclusion of women in male-typical game spaces, but little research has been done on the former, especially in regards to how women's identity is formed in male-typical game spaces. This paper seeks to answer the question of how women form identity in male game spaces, specifically in the game World of Warcraft. I find that not only is it possible for women to practice a range of gender identities in games, but those identities are more fixed than existing literature suggests. Female gamers also use the game spaces to create a collective identity as female gamers, challenging the sexism that exists in the game. Furthermore, rather than the Internet being a place where alternate identities are practiced, the Internet is possibly a place where one's "true" self is free to be expressed.

In 1996 the best-selling girls' computer game of all time was released for sale: Barbie Fashion Designer (Herz 1997). With this software, every girl with a computer and a printer became a fashion designer for Barbie. There were different styles of pants, skirts, dresses, and tops to pick from, as well as multiple fabric patterns. Once a style was complete, you printed it on special cloth paper, cut it out, put the pieces together, and voila! you had the most unique Barbie fashion on the block. How do I know so much about this game? I, too, spent many an hour deciding whether Barbie's floor-length skirt would look better in faux denim or huge flowers. Little did I know that Barbie Fashion Designer opened up a market for girls' video games that had not existed before. The game proved that girls would buy, and play with, computer games, toys that until recently were thought as only viable when marketed to boys.

Putting aside for a moment that the biggest development in girls' games was Barbie software, let's examine the girls' games movement. One company that was at the forefront (before, fittingly, it merged with Mattel) was Purple Moon, a game development company based in Silicon Valley. Rather than sell games, however, Purple Moon sold "friendship adventures for girls" (Eno 1997). The company designed its games based on assumptions such as, "rather than having a superhero, girls want characters they can relate to - who are as real as their best friends" (Eno 1997). The games made by Purple Moon were more akin to choose-your-own adventure stories than actual games, and like most girls' games the company was eventually bought out.

But there are more problems with the girls' games movement than the fact that none of the games ever sell a decent number of copies. One of the main problems with girls' games is that they don't challenge games as male-typical spaces. Games have historically included misogynistic images of women who are "damsels requiring rescue, or rewards for successful completion of the mission" (Cassell and Jenkins 2000:7). In addition, "content analyses have

consistently found that video games include far more male characters than female characters” (Ivory 2006). Leaving these sexist images intact and creating a separate space for girls to game in is not going to solve the problematic representations of women in games, but rather “simply perpetuate male dominance” (Cassell and Jenkins 2000:25).

Another problem with creating a separate sphere for female gamers is that the way in which games are being redesigned to appeal to girls' interests is troubling. The focus on friendship, fashion and flashy graphics conserves stereotypes about girls' interests rather than challenging girls to break free of the debilitating gender norms they have been socialized into. Rather than design games for girls, “we should... expand the range of activities we can perform on a computer... Otherwise we are teaching girls to act like girls are supposed to act” (Cassell and Jenkins 2000:28).

There is, however, another option, which is to integrate girls into the game spaces that are designed by, created for, and marketed to boys. All-girl followings of a variety of games have popped up, and many play online simultaneously as a team. Rather than feeling pushed out by the sexist images and abundance of violence, these girls embrace the traditionally male qualities of the game and enjoy using the games a space to break free from offline gender expectations (Cassell and Jenkins 2000: 33). One such girl said of violence in games, “Maybe it's a problem that little girls don't like to play games that slaughter entire planets. Maybe it's why we're still underpaid, still struggling, still fighting for our rights. Maybe if we had the mettle to take on an entire planet we could fight some of the smaller battles we face everyday” (as cited in Cassell and Jenkins 2000). These women hope that battling gender online will allow them to stand up for themselves offline.

Much like the critique of girls' games, Cassell and Jenkins (2000) posit that merely joining male games, rather than raising issues of the sexism within the games, does not challenge the idea of men as the gamer norm. Furthermore, it is problematic to embrace the strong female characters (think Lara Croft) that exist in a handful of games, as many of them are hyper-sexualized. Women should be made aware of the “dangers in linking female empowerment to images couched in terms of traditional sex appeal” (Whitta, as cited in Cassell and Jenkins 2000:30).

Not only are there problems with each of the dominant models of addressing the gender disparity in video game players, but the two models don't address the full range of experience that can take place, especially the range of gender experiences that can take place within video games. Girls' games appear to embrace hyper-femininity, but they do so by creating separate feminine spaces. Conversely, the research done on girls who currently play mainstream games portrays them as unfeminine to the point of verging on masculine. But what about the range of gender expressions in between?

This paper seeks to answer the question of how women form identity in male game spaces, specifically in the game World of Warcraft. I find that not only is it possible for women to practice a range of gender identities in games, but those identities are more fixed than existing literature suggests. Female gamers also use the game spaces to create a collective identity as female gamers, challenging the sexism that exists in the game. Furthermore, rather than the Internet being a place where alternate identities are practiced, the Internet is possibly a place where one's “true” self is free to be expressed.

This argument will be made by first reviewing the relevant literature on identity in the age of the Internet, as well as literature on gender identity. The methods used for obtaining data

will then be discussed, followed by the findings from the interviews. The data will then be discussed in terms of the theoretical literature, and conclusions will be drawn in regards to the state of girls' games.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The bulk of current literature on online identity makes the argument that it is a location where identities are often created and recreated on a constant basis. However, given the types of Internet activity examined in such studies (many of them focus on role playing games, or RPGs), the conclusions are not likely to be generalizable to the larger population of Internet users, and it is more likely that individuals will have one singular identity rather than multiple identities. Furthermore, given research conducted on gender, it is likely that the identities of women in online spaces will be diverse in terms of gender presentation.

Online environments have been heralded as environments of extreme identity play. This idea is most often traced back to Sherry Turkle's analysis of multi-user dungeons (MUDs) in the early 1990's. Through her research on the players of MUDs, Turkle (1994) concluded that the space was an environment of extreme identity play. She goes on to state that in the MUDs, "the self is not only decentered but multiplied without limit. There is an unparalleled opportunity to play with one's identity and to 'try out' new ones" (Turkle 1994:159). Her theory has been supported by other empirical studies, such as the one conducted by T.L. Taylor and players of the MMORPG *Everquest*. Although she cautions that "we must consider critically how much freedom people have in reconstructing themselves online," Taylor (2006:95) concluded that users often create online identities that differ from their offline identities. She views identity play as one of the traditional elements of RPGs, stating, "there is a long tradition within RPG culture to

try and inhabit characters that are quite opposite of how a player might normally and think outside of the game.” Dennis Waskul (2007) finds the same to be true in regard to Internet chat, and the individuals he surveyed often had more than one screen name, and thus more than one identity.

One aspect of identity play often mentioned is gender play. Turkle (1994:164) mentions that “the game allows its players to experience rather than merely observe what it feels like to be the opposite gender or to have no gender at all.” Taylor (2006:97) states, “Women in *EverQuest* are constantly engaged in playing with traditional notions of femininity and reformulating gender identities...” She views competitive games as “a potentially radical framework and one that can challenge stereotypical forms of femininity” (2006:97). This views are much in line with the research on female gamers that views them as challenging, in very masculine ways, traditional feminine gender norms.

What about the Internet fosters a system of multiple and highly variable identities? Waskul (2007:121) theorizes that the anonymity of the Internet plays a part in the construction of multiple identities, stating, “To compromise anonymity is to compromise the supreme power to construct any self that one desires at any moment.” Turkle posits that the draw of MUDs is the ability to be used as “spaces for thinking through and working through issues of personal identity” (1994:163). She also states that a “postmodern ethos of the value of multiple identities and of playing out aspects of the self” are at work.

But do these studies represent the population at large? Waskul studies interaction via online chat, which is an experience in which individuals may talk to each other only once; there is not necessarily any sustained communication over a long period of time (although there are indeed friends who only talk via online chat and have done so for quite a while). Therefore, it

might be easier for the individuals in his research to maintain multiple identities because the identities don't have to be consistent from day to day, the history for an alternate identity doesn't have to be in-depth, and the person has the option of dropping that identity at any given moment.

Turkle and Taylor, on the other hand, study player populations in which a deeper community is formed; participants often play together and interact with one another on a regular basis for a sustained period of time. However, there is still reason to believe that the population in both studies is not representative of other gaming communities, nor of the Internet population as a whole. As Laura Robinson (2007:101) suggests, "Today, the user population is far different; it is no longer dominated by white, male gamers." She goes on to say that "postmodern accounts of cyberself-ing cannot credibly be regarded as generalizable to newer Internet populations who express preferences for different types of online activities" than MUDs, a mere niche of the World Wide Web (2007:101). Rather than a place where identities can be constructed and reconstructed at will, Robinson posits, and my research will show, that "users bring into being bodies, personas, and personalities framed according to the same categories that exist in the offline world" (2007:94). Although the Internet is a place that is separate from physical reality, the society created in the offline world is often recreated, rather than challenged, in the online world.

Given that cyberspace is more likely to mimic physical space than be a great departure from it, there are some clues as to how women in cyberspace may form their identities. For example, it is probable that women would portray a range of gender performances. This assumption is built upon the widely accepted sociological view that gender is not a naturally-occurring construct, but rather one that is socially constructed (Lorber 1994) and that gender is something one performs (Butler 1990) rather than something one is.ⁱ Furthermore, the women in

the study will most likely portray a range of gender performances, since there are a range of acceptable femininities that exist in offline society (Connell 1997:22).

The supposition of a range of gender performances is further supported by Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1977:209) theory of how individuals integrate into "skewed groups", which she defines as groups where fifteen percent of the population is comprised of one gender and eighty-five percent of the group is made up of the other. She labeled the minority populations "tokens" and the majority population "dominants", and described how tokens face three major issues, one of which is pressure to perform (1977:210). In regards to performance pressure, women can act in one of three ways: they can over-achieve, embrace their token status, or try to become socially invisible (1977:219). And, although Kanter does not state so explicitly, her findings suggest that the strategies involve performing in a gender-neutral way, a feminine way, or a masculine way, respectively. Although her study is relatively old, it is not entirely outdated; it suggests that women, when they exist in token numbers, will practice a range of identity tactics in regard to gender presentation.

Based on the literature reviewed, it is theorized that women who play World of Warcraft will portray their gender in varying ways, but that the way in which a participant portrays her gender will be stable and unchanging, as opposed to the multiple identities that Waskul, Turkle, and Taylor found. Following Robinson, the women will construct their identities using categories given in society, and thus it is assumed that the environment the women find in the game world will be very similar to the environment they find in the offline world.

WOW: WORLD OF WHAT?

World of Warcraft (WoW), released by Blizzard Entertainment in November 2004, is a massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG). To break it down a bit further, as a role playing game WoW involves using an elaborate avatar as the actor in the game, in other words, playing a specific looking person, or role. 'Massive multiplayer' refers to the size of the game, as well as the number of people playing it; as the name suggests, the game world is quite extensive and many people play at the same time in a common virtual world, allowing them to interact with one another. 'Online' refers to the space in which the game is played, but it is an important qualifier to add to the definition of games such as WoW because it makes clear the fact that the game cannot be played offline, even though the software to run the game is stored on an individual's personal computer (as opposed to Yahoo! Games, where the game is accessed through a website).

Although the game is played in a virtual space, that space is not one central location. Multiple servers exist, each offering the player an almost identical copy of the game. The aspects that change from server to server are the character and the type. Individuals who subscribe to the service can create new characters on any server they desire, but once created characters are locked to the server they were created on.ⁱⁱ Therefore, although there are millions of users, not all of them get a chance to interact with one another. Each server has its own name, as well as its own types. Servers can be either Player versus Environment (PvE), Player versus Player (PvP), or Role Playing (RP). PvE servers are ones in which the players are there to play against the environment the game created, rather than to battle other players. PvP servers are where players can play against (i.e. kill) other players in the game as well as the characters in the game created by Blizzard. RP servers are environments where players truly take on the identity

of their character while in the game. In WoW, which is based on a medieval fantasy world, this often involves speaking in Old English and exercising courtly manners.

The first thing a player does in WoW is create a new character (also referred to as “rolling a toon”). The player must first choose which faction to be a part of, the Alliance or the Horde. On a PvP server, only players of opposing factions can engage in combat with one another (Alliance can “duel” other Alliance, and Horde can “duel” other Horde, but no real killing takes place). Within each faction, there are multiple races for a user to choose from. Race in WoW is not the same as one would conceptualize it in the offline world; in fact, it is more akin to selecting a species. In the Alliance, one can choose to be a night elf, human, gnome, dwarf, or a draenei. Races for the Horde consist of blood elves, orcs, undead, tauren, and trolls. As one might be able to glean from the names, the races for the Alliance tend to look more attractive, while the Horde races tend to look more menacing.ⁱⁱⁱ Although there are some attributes attached to race, the aspect most impacted by the choice of race is the look of the character. The area in which the player begins the game is also determined by the race of the character.

After a faction and race have been selected, a class must be chosen. Again, class as constructed in WoW is different from how sociologists use the term, and can be thought of as equivalent to a profession. The class determines what weapons the character can use, what type of armor the character can wear, and what statistics will become important for the character. The classes to choose from are druid, hunter, mage, paladin, priest, rogue, shaman, warlock and warrior; all classes are available to both factions. Class choice is influenced by race (all races have a set of classes available, so not all race/class combinations are possible), but there is enough overlap that a player deciding to be a warrior class is not forced to choose on race over another, nor one faction over another.

The remaining character attributes vary by race, but always include gender and skin color, and usually include face type, hair color, hair style, and sometimes what piercings a character has. Gender is limited to male and female, but the gender of the character does not affect any of the character's stats; both male and female characters are treated equally by the game (treatment by the other players in the game is a different story, and will be discussed later in the paper). Skin color ranges from stark white to dark for more human-like races, and races such as night elves and tauren choose from various shades of blue and purple. This is the last step in choosing the permanent attributes for a character.

Once in the game, a character can change his/her appearance mainly through the clothing, usually referred to as armor, that he/she decided to wear. As new armor is often obtained with each new level, the look of a character can change quite often. In addition to armor, costumes are also available in the game, one example being a wedding dress that can be made for in-game weddings.

The game is played by fulfilling tasks in order to gain experience points (XP). After a certain amount of XP has been obtained (the XP needed to level is relative to a player's current level), the player's level is increased. Players start at level one, and the highest level currently available in the game is level 70. Obtaining a new level does not mean that one is transported to a new space in the game (as in the Mario Brothers series), but is more akin to getting a year older; the player continues to play in the exact same world as before, only with the option to gain new abilities and equipment. Armor and weapons have a level requirement, so as a player increases in level he/she can use better equipment.

The tasks that one can engage in to gain XP include questing and grinding, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Questing refers to being assigned to complete a task by a non-

player character (NPC), which is a character that is played by the game rather than played by another person. Quests can range from bringing an item from one place to another, collecting a certain amount of a specific item, or killing a certain amount of a specific type of creature. Grinding is the act of killing many creatures over a period of time in order to gain XP or get better items (which you can “loot” from dead corpses). However, sometimes grinding is part of a quest, and thus the player can earn XP for killing each creature individually as well as a boost of XP after a certain number has been reached because he/she completed the quest.

As far as the social aspect of the game is concerned, players can (and do) talk to each other within the game. Some of the more difficult quests require players to group together in order to complete them, and thus cooperative play is also an important aspect of the game. Some individuals also join guilds, which are groups that are both social and quest-oriented. Guild members will often group with each other rather than other non-guild members, and guilds will also discuss the game, as well as their personal lives. It is also common practice for guild members of higher level to come to the aid of lower-level members, creating a support network for new (or fairly new) characters in the game.^{iv}

METHODS

Data Collection

In order to collect data on how women present themselves in WoW, I conducted 8 in-depth interviews with women, which lasted anywhere from 15 to 35 minutes in length. Interviewing was chosen for this project because it is a good method to acquire more in-depth data about people's individual experiences with certain issues (Babbie 2007:305). Being able to have a conversation with the players yielded more data about their internal processes than merely

being a participant observer in the game might have. Furthermore, interviews allowed me to revisit my driving theory as I move through the research process, honing in on emerging key themes in subsequent interviews.

A small core of female interviewees was chosen using a sample of convenience and a snowball method. As Babbie (2007:185) states, “snowball sampling... is appropriate when the members of a special population are difficult to locate. The snowball sample was derived by obtaining contacts through my brother, a player of the game. The sample of convenience was constructed by posting an announcement on bulletin boards of three Facebook groups for women who play WoW.^v Given that the percentage of women who play WoW is small, and given that more women than men who play probably connected to other female gamers, these methods of obtaining interviewees were the most appropriate.

The sample ranged in age from 19 to 29. Of the women who participated, all described their race as white or Caucasian, and seven out of the eight identified as straight, with the eighth identifying as bisexual. Six of the women lived in the continental United States, and two lived in Canada. The women played on a variety of servers, as well on different types of servers (PVE, PVP, and RPPVP). Three women played primarily Alliance characters, three played a mix of Horde and Alliance, and one played primarily Horde characters.^{vi} All of the women had at least one character at level 70, which indicated that they had been playing the game for a many months, and most of them play three to four nights a week for hours at a time. Therefore, the sample was constructed of “hard-core” players, rather than casual players.

A specific set of questions was used in all of the interviews (see Appendix A), but if themes that I did not account for began to emerge I allowed the interview to stray from the pre-formed list of questions, and any new questions asked were added to the list for future

interviews. In order to ensure that the questions were worded using the proper gamer jargon, I pre-tested them on one male player.

The interviews were conducted over Ventrilo, a voice chat program that allows users to record their conversations. A consent form (Appendix B) was sent to participants via email before the interview, and the respondents agreed to the terms verbally. While this is not the ideal method of conducting interviews in some projects, it is relevant to use it for the purposes of this research study for a multitude of reasons. First, it is the program that most players use to engage in verbal chat while playing the game, so the interviewees were likely to be familiar with the program. Second, it is a free application, and thus did not exclude any potential respondents on the basis of socioeconomic status. Third, although the digital divide is often cited as a reason to not use online methods in research studies, the fact that the game requires the use of a computer means that any race and class disparities in the sample exist in the game population as a whole, not just in the few women I chose to interview. Therefore, although the Internet has pitfalls associated with using it as a research method, those pitfalls are by and large negated in the specific case of this research study.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were conducted, I coded them based on gender presentation strategies, and the themes that emerged were the following three gender identities: acting masculine, acting feminine, and acting gender-neutral. In order to code the interviews, I transcribed each interview, read the transcriptions, coded the interviews once, and then coded again based on the emerging themes. However, I was open to coding experiences into more than one category (as opposed to having rigid categories), and I also created one new category. Once

each individual had been placed in a category, I read the transcripts again to confirm that the categorization was correct and pulled specific quotes that supported the placement into the assigned category.

Ethical Implications

The major ethical issue that I kept in mind during the course of this study is how research such as this can influence the public opinion of girls who play games. It is possible that the findings of this study will propagate stereotypes about female gamers. Thus, I was mindful of the position of power I hold as a researcher and exercised caution when discussing what some might view as women exploiting the system of the game for their own benefit. To this end, I made every effort to note that the conclusions of the paper are drawn from a small sample of women who do not represent every woman who plays WoW, nor do they represent the female player population as a whole.

FINDINGS

The women in the study did indeed present a range of gender performances. These gender performances can be summed up in three general categories: masculine presentation, gender-neutral presentation, and feminine presentation. These categories are not strict, and there are similarities between the three categories. The differences between respondents within categories are noted.

Masculine Presentation

Only one respondent, Chelsea, portrayed herself in an overtly masculine manner. Chelsea, 19, started playing the game because her brother recommended it. She played a female

character for a bit, but soon had to give it up. When asked to describe why she had to stop playing female characters, she described an event that happened early on in her game experience:

I'm a nightelf druid and I just went around – and of course I'm under level 20 – and I'm just trying to quest, and I remember this gnome – I was like, somewhere – and this gnome came up to me and this other girl I was playing with, pointed at us, and said, “Take off your clothes and dance.” And I think that was about the time that I went, “hmmm... I'm not going to be a girl in this game very much longer.”

Chelsea's incident as a female character is not an isolated one, and many of the interviewees said that they were often asked for links to online pictures or profiles when other players found out they were female. However, Chelsea is the only one who was so offended that she decided to switch genders altogether. She is the only respondent I interviewed who plays primarily male characters. And it is not only the gender of her avatar that is different from the other respondents. She is also the only rogue I interviewed, a class which most of the interviewees agreed is most often played by men.

Although her avatar is male and her class is male-typical, Chelsea states that she does not actively monitor her speech patterns to make her character appear more masculine. While in character, she will refer to herself as “he”, but she does so mainly to reduce confusion people experience by having male characters refer to themselves using female gender pronouns. Still, she finds that most players think she is male offline as well as online. When asked why players think she is a man, she states, “I just think that my sense of humor – sometimes people will see that in their chat log, and they'll think, 'Oh, that's a guy thing to say.' I really let people make the assumption for themselves.” The other respondents mentioned that their feminine speech patterns give away their gender even in text-based chat, but most people assume Chelsea is a man even though she doesn't monitor her speech. Given that it is an uncommon expectation that

women play male characters (although men playing female characters is quite common), in Chelsea's case the gender of her avatar seems to be overriding all other factors in determining somebody's offline gender.

Chelsea feels empowered by having a male avatar. She notes:

It just seems I get a bit more, um, respect. It's almost like, "Oh, this is a guy saying it, it must be true." Or, if I'm being really stern, or if I'm insulting someone, they're like, "Oh, that person is – that's ok, that's acceptable, he's kind of cool." Whereas, if I'm a girl, or they know that I'm a girl, they might think, "She's kind of a bitch."

Not only does being a male character give Chelsea's statements more authority, she is also allowed to be more masculine in her treatment of other characters without being attributed a negative label such as "bitch."

Interestingly, Chelsea also finds that she can gain the same rewards as players who act overtly feminine. Those who know that her offline gender is female (her guild-mates and close friends) are willing to offer her the same benefits that are offered to other female players; she, like many of the other respondents, has received free items and has been helped to advance through certain areas of the game. She does caution that the help she received could have been because of her status as co-leader of the guild, but she acknowledges that treatment she receives does change once people know that her offline gender is female.

Although Chelsea's presentation can be described as masculine, it can also be described as male. When Chelsea is not actively announcing her gender she is assumed by other players to be male online as well as offline; in these situations, she is not presenting in a masculine way, but a male way, or presenting actually as a man rather than as masculine woman. It is interesting to note that Chelsea doesn't have to actively monitor her gender presentation in order to be

perceived as male by other players. If a player does not mark herself as female, she is assumed to be male. When she does make it known that she is a woman, Chelsea's actions as a player and as a guild co-leader do have the ability to promote better opinions about female gamers. However, when it is not known that she is a woman, her actions are only a reflection of male players, and thus have no affect on the perceptions of women in the WoW environment.

Gender-Neutral Presentation

More common than masculine presentation was a gender-neutral presentation, which was seen in three of the women, Amanda, Megan, and Whitney. Amanda, 20, started playing the game as a diversion; she is an at-home mom with a young child, and she needed something to do during the day while the baby was sleeping. Amanda acts in a supportive manner when she plays with other characters; she is the main healer for her party, a role in the game that requires the player to support other players rather than attack mobs directly. In addition, she also mentions that she is not a prominent member in her social network within the game. When asked about how she is treated by her guild, she stated, "I'm not overlooked, but I'm not, like, the center of attention." In addition, Amanda's favorite thing to do in the game is "farm", a monotonous solo activity in the game that does not require interaction with any other players. While she is not entirely invisible, she does not go out of her way to draw attention to herself.

Another player who utilized a gender neutral identity in the game was Megan, 29. She started playing the game because she had played previous titles produced by the same company and she was the only respondent who had played the game during beta testing before the national release of the game. Thus, she was the oldest respondent in regards to game-play as well as the oldest respondent in terms of age. In regards to presentation, Megan hid her gender identity in

the game by only telling specific people, usually those in her guild, that her offline gender is female, in essence trying to minimize her exposure as a woman. In addition, Megan was critical of women who did choose to make their gender identity apparent. While she thought that there were no advantages or disadvantages to being a female player, she did acknowledge that some female players use their femininity to get rewards in the game. She thought poorly of women who do so, stating, "It's wrong for them to use the fact that they're a female to gain either favor or help in the game." Rather than using the fact that gender can garner certain rewards in WoW to her advantage (as some of the other respondents did), Megan vilified the women who over-emphasized their gender, reinforcing the point that she believed gender should not be a part of the game.

However, these women do not ignore gender entirely. They are quick to confront gender, perhaps as a strategy to keep the game entirely gender-neutral. When Amanda encounters sexism she makes a point of saying something rather than letting the comments continue. Megan responded that she doesn't experience much sexism in the game, but attributes that phenomenon to the fact that her guild has some young children as members rather than to a lack of sexism in the game itself. Thus, it can be inferred that sexism is actively monitored in Megan's guild. Much as they monitor the affect their gender has on the game in terms of rewards, these two women also manage the repercussions to being female in the gaming world.

Contrastingly, Whitney, 20, does not fight sexism as actively as Megan and Ashley. When asked if she encounters sexism within the game, Whitney stated, "Nothing that isn't expected. I mean every now and then I'll get the typical comment out of a raid – you'll get a sexist comment. But it's all with people I know, so I know they're kidding." Rather than argue against sexist comments, Whitney accepts them as a normal part of the game world.

Like Megan, Whitney has a poor opinion of women who use their gender to their advantage. When asked about women who over-emphasize their gender, she answered, “Once people start playing the girl card I think it's going to make us take a step back.” Not only does Whitney think women who act overly feminine ruin their own experience of the game, she perceives them as having the potential to ruin the game for all women. In addition, Whitney only offers her offline gender identity if other players ask directly, continuing the trend set by Amanda and Megan to keep one's offline gender somewhat hidden.

Amanda, Megan, and Whitney all attempted to be gender neutral by increasing the invisibility of their gender, as well as their invisibility overall. Megan and Whitney furthered their desire to remain gender neutral in the game by disapproving of the women who made expressed their gender in a more overt manner. In addition, Amanda and Megan worked to keep the game gender-neutral by combating the sexism that occurred in the game.

Feminine Presentation

In contrast to the current literature on women who play male video games, four of the women in my study acted in an overtly feminine manner: Ashley, Kristin, Victoria, and Jessica. Ashley, 21, started playing the game because her boyfriend played. Unlike Amanda and Megan, Ashley was very open about sharing her offline gender identity. In regards to telling other players she is female, she stated, “I kind of like people knowing that there's an actual female playing.” Rather than try to hide her gender identity, Ashley made a point of broadcasting it. In addition, she noted that even when she didn't directly tell somebody she is female, she is sure that they could tell because, as she puts it, “I don't know how to type like a guy!” By using

gender-typical speech patterns, even when typing, Ashley ensured that almost everybody she encountered knew that she was female.

Ashley was one of the many girls interviewed to note that women tend to get rewards from male players in the game, both material (items, money) and non-material (help with parts of the game, advice). It should be noted that this reward structure is not one that is coded into the game, but rather one that the players have created. Ashley, similar to Megan, was quick to make negative statements about women who use their gender in order to get free items and extra help. However, when asked if she has been offered the same rewards, she said that she had, and that she did accept the reward (in this case, in-game money) offered. Ashley wanted to be able to reap the benefits of being a token in the game, but she did not want other women to reap the same rewards, possibly because if all women used their femininity to advance their way through the game eventually the reward system would play itself out.

Ashley did note that although being feminine in the game has its rewards, there are also draw-backs to announcing one's gender. She mentioned that when it came to offering advice, rather than receiving it, women's comments were not valued as much as men's. She stated that she thinks some of the players have a mentality of, "Oh, she's a girl, what does she know?" Thus, although overtly feminine women in WoW receive some benefits from other players based on their gender, there is still a drawback to emphasizing one's femininity in the game. While a female may be rewarded directly because of her gender, her reputation as a knowledgeable player may be damaged by her overt presentation of gender.

Kristin, 19, who started playing because her friend and roommate played the game, also perceived not being listened to as much as the men. In her case, she was commenting on the ability to ask men to stop making sexist comments. She stated, "You can ask them to stop, but

they don't necessarily listen, and your voice is not necessarily heard as loud, I think, as if you were a guy.” In regards to how women in general are treated in the game Kristin states, “I feel that a lot of times girls just have labels, so that they (the men) know what they're dealing with when they talk to a certain girl, whether it's the noob girl who's really sweet but doesn't know what she's talking about, or it's the slutty girl, or it's the really good healer girl.” Both of these statements reveal Kristin's view that women in the game tend to not have as much voice as the men, and therefore they are ignored and often reduced to a short description.

However, Kristin's negative experiences as a female player do not prevent her from acting feminine in the game. Similar to Ashley, Kristin noted that there are rewards for being female in the game. Specifically, she mentioned that being a girl in the game allowed her to be more flirty and joke around a lot. She mentioned a specific instance in which being female helped her:

Like, say, we're missing somebody, and we really need somebody else to come, and there's this guy on my friends list, and if he could just say yes we could really go into Kara. And everyone is asking him, but he doesn't want to go – he's tired. So I whisper him, just saying hey we really want you to come, just emphasizing the fact that we really need you, and I really want you to be there, pleeeaaase. Just sort of, I don't know, playing up the fact that I am a girl, and I can ask favors from a guy if I want to.

By acting subservient and stroking his ego, Kristin was able to get her male friend to come to the raid and help her out. If she was not willing to act feminine in this way then her friend would most likely have gone to bed instead of playing with the group.

Victoria, 19, has also found that acting overtly feminine in a raid can be beneficial. She started playing the game because her boyfriend played, and she admits to over-emphasizing her gender in order to get other players to give her the loot during a raid. She likes being able to “play a little bit of the flirting game and get some stuff.” Similar to Ashley and Kristin, Victoria

does not hide her gender identity, and will “tell pretty much anybody if it needs to be said.” She also mentions that being female can be beneficial because male players are more patient with other female characters who don't know how to play the game than they are with male characters who may not know how to play the game.

However, not all aspects of these women's gameplay is strictly feminine. They all revel in the battle aspects of the game. Ashley's favorite character is her mage because “she can kill things dead,” Kristin's favorite is her paladin because she is “geared to the teeth with awesome purples,” and Victoria liked her Tauren because she “has some really good gear on her.” In addition, Ashley mentioned that she liked playing a certain group of people because they made her feel like “one of the guys,” Victoria's favorite thing to do is PVP because she likes “being able to kill other players,” and in regards to making men in the game look bad, Kristin stated, “I aim to make them look bad doing whatever the heck they're doing, and I love doing it!” While this may seem to counter the feminine presentation of these women it is important to note that the context being studied is a game, it is not surprising to see that even the women who engage in overtly feminine aspects of identity play are still highly competitive and like beating the men at their own game.

Furthermore, although these women overemphasize their femininity in order to gain rewards, they will not allow men to overemphasize it in a negative way. Ashley is part of a guild run by women, and part of the culture of the guild is that sexism is not tolerated in any way. The guild leader, Ashley, and the rest of the guild members actively monitor the guild chat for sexism and rebuke offenders if necessary. Kristin is a co-leader of a guild, and she also actively monitors the guild chat for sexist comments. Because of her position of authority in the guild she can take action against guild members who do not follow the rules regarding sexist

comments if need be. Victoria is not part of a woman-run guild, but she has left a guild because of sexism. Once her guild would not let her run an instance with them, and she perceived the reason to be that she played better than some of the men in the guild and they resented her for it. While she could not punish those male players directly, she did leave the guild, thereby removing herself from an overly-sexist situation.

DISCUSSION

The identities performed by the women in this study can be discussed in terms of three categories: women as their characters, women as gamers, and women as themselves. The first, women as their characters, refers to the identity strategies the women use in when playing the game, and includes the number of online identities each woman maintains. The second category, women as gamers, refers to the strategies that all or most of the women employed in order to make the game a more equitable environment for women in general. The third category, women as themselves, refers to the connections made between the online and offline identities the women maintain.

Women as Characters

As discussed earlier, the women in this study were found to present themselves in either a masculine way (1 respondent), in a gender-neutral way (3 respondents), and in a feminine way (4 respondents). However, all of the women, regardless of their gender presentation, subvert traditional notions of femininity simply by playing the game. This is most salient in the case of the feminine women, who flirted in order to gain advantage in one instant and then beat the pants off of the male players in the next. The competitive spirit of these women is contrary to

normative conventions of femininity, and thus challenges the meek and demure portrayal of women.

Furthermore, regardless of the way they actively present themselves, all of the women at one time or another have presented as a man simply because players in WoW are assumed to be male until proven otherwise. While Chelsea is the most likely to be perceived as male because her avatar is male, due to the fact that many male players play female characters even the women who play female characters are most likely to be perceived as male players. When the interviewees were asked what reactions they received when they told other players they were women, almost all of them mentioned that there was some surprise when their offline gender was revealed. Whitney thinks that it is not as uncommon to find women in the game these days, and the others players are “not shocked that a girl's playing the game, they're just shocked that it's not another male rolling a female character.” Regardless of the cause, the fact remains that most of the women are assumed to be men until they reveal themselves to be female.

What is most important to mention in regards to the theories presented by Turkle, Taylor, and Waskul is that the presentation strategies of the women was constant. All of the women interviewed had more than one character that she played on a regular basis, but her identity remained consistent across characters. This was based on many factors, the first being that it is common for a person to have multiple characters in the same guild. Since the peer group is the same, even when the character has changed, the individual is treated the same in terms of offline personality. In other words, Whitney is Whitney regardless of whether she is playing her gnome mage or her human paladin, and thus the treatment from her guild does not change. Guilds also affect the unity of self presentation in terms of how much time is spent with the guild. An individual can play with the same guild for years, and all of the respondents mentioned that their

guilds were like an extended family, or at the very least a group of close friends. In regards to hiding offline gender, Chelsea stated, "It's kind of hard to hide that from people after a while." One can imagine that it would be just as hard to hide other personal details after a period of time. Thus, it is easier for people to maintain one constant identity than a myriad of multiple identities. She went on to say that she has kept her identity more hidden on one of her alts because "he's not a serious character." Thus, Waskul's findings on identity play in random Internet chat may be valid, but identity play is not likely to be found in long-term situations such as MMORPGs.

The increasing surveillance opportunities of the Internet have also played a part in making it harder to hide one's offline identity, especially when it comes to gender identity. More than one participant mentioned that voice chat, which was recently integrated into the game (and has been done through VOIP services for years), makes it near impossible to hide one's offline gender. Unless a female player is part of a larger twenty or forty person raid, a situation in which it is common to lose track of who is currently speaking, the feminine voice is a give-away that the player is female. Even if a player decides not to use voice chat, she is still likely to be asked for her MySpace profile^{vii}, especially if it has been revealed that she is female. MySpace will reveal one's offline gender identity if the player has not already done so in game, and thus it reduces the opportunity for gender-crossing that was once possible on the Internet. MySpace also restricts other forms of identity play as it acts as a central repository of a singular and unified identity. Unless a player creates separate accounts for every online persona, all roads lead to the same MySpace profile, and thus all online personae can be traced back to the same offline identity.

Women as Gamers

All of the women had some similar experiences making their way through a male-typical game world. These similarities revolved around reactions to sexism, and were as simple as asking other players to stop a certain line of chat and as involved as starting guilds run by women. The most common, of course, was the former. Almost all of the women I talked to mentioned that they had experienced sexism in the game at one point or another, and of those who did all but one chastised the other players for making such comments. In fact, the women, especially those who presented in a gender-neutral way, would often reveal their gender in order to cause the men they were rebuking to feel an added dose of shame. Although they were not working collectively, these women each individually sought to make WoW a more equitable space for female players by trying to eliminate negative comments directed toward women.

Another way in which the women worked to create gender-equitable spaces was through the creation of guilds run by women. Kristin, who co-leads a guild (but did not start the guild) thinks that her guild is far different from male-run guilds because she and her co-leader (who happens to be Chelsea) make an effort to practice an ethics of care in their guild that involves respecting all individuals regardless of gender. Amanda and Ashley, who at one point were members of the same female-led guild, Order of Time, mentioned that sexism was actively put down as part of the culture of their guild. Jessica, who is also part of Order of Time, mentioned that she experienced sexism when she first started playing the game, but she hasn't had any experiences with it since she joined the guild.

Women as Themselves

The women in the study also made connections between their online experiences and offline experiences. The first theme that developed was that of a freeing of the self. Jessica

mentioned that although she has body-image issues in the offline world that restrict the extent to which she expresses herself sexually, in the online world she finds she is a very sexual and flirtatious person. Many of the women also mentioned experiencing a freedom with foul language while in the game, and Chelsea admitted to “swearing like a sailor” while playing WoW. Overall, the game does allow the women a chance to break free from the social norms they are expected to adhere to in the offline world.

Another theme that developed was the lack of transferability of skills from one social world to another. Kristin mentioned that she had developed great skills in the game, such as the ability to heal an entire raid party without a single member dying, but that she didn't see how those skills could carry over to the offline world. More importantly, in the game such healing skills give her a high level of self-confidence, but as the skill-set does not transfer, she finds that the confidence does not transfer to physical space either.

CONCLUSION

The women interviewed have much to add to current video game research. As the research on women in male game spaces suggests, women sometimes do act in overtly masculine ways while playing male games. However, the overwhelming majority of women in this study acted in gender-neutral or overtly feminine ways, counteracting the stereotype of butch female gamer. Most importantly, this exploratory research has contradicted the work of past researchers who found that Internet users often engage in identity play by having multiple online personae. All of the women in this study had only one, or at least only one dominant, online identity. Furthermore, rather than being separate from her offline identity, a woman's online identity and offline identity were often very similar. The only differences between the online self and the

offline self were that oftentimes the online self was more free to express one's true personality than the offline self was, due to a changed set of social norms.

Going back to what sparked the idea for this paper, the movement to create separate game spaces for girls, it can easily be said that there are plenty of women who are content playing games coded by, made for, and marketed to men. This does not mean that the male-centric video game industry should go unchallenged, however. It is necessary that video game companies begin to actively think of women when they are designing their games because only then will the game companies be designing games for all people on the gender spectrum. There are plenty of women who enjoy typically masculine aspects of gameplay, just as there are some who enjoy the typically feminine aspects of gameplay. Similarly, it is almost certain that there are some men who would enjoy the typically feminine aspects of gameplay as much as the typically masculine aspects. MMORPGs should work on integrating both aspects so they can reach a wider audience and expand their market base.

Furthermore, game companies should work to remove some aspects of game play that may cause women to stop playing the game, or to never start in the first place. These aspects are a lack of female characters and the overly sexual design of female characters. WoW made the first aspect a non-issue by allowing all character options to be available as either male or female, as many MMORPGs have done before them. This model should be maintained to ensure that women can play characters that are representative of themselves, which this study has shown they are apt to do. The women interviewed also praised the design team for including female avatar choices, and noted that it increased their desire to play the game. The latter aspect, however, still needs to be addressed by video game designers. Although the worlds being designed are fantasy worlds, the women do not have to be overly svelte, have large breasts, and

be able to dance around with hardly any clothes on. Games could be just as enjoyable were they to feature normal looking women with normal-sized breasts who did not dance around seductively.

Most importantly, this study of women who play World of Warcraft has shown that it is possible for a mainstream gaming company to make games that appeal to women, however flawed some aspects of the game design may still be. Therefore, it is a better option for parties interested in including young girls in the game industry to try and change the existing market rather than create a separate game market for women. A girls' games market is doomed to fail due to lack of initial capital, which increases the likelihood of poorly designed games, which in turn leads to girls disliking games even more than they did when they first started. Creating poorly designed and coded games in the ghettoized industry that is the girls' games movement is not helping girls, it's hurting them. Instead, the effort should be spent to create one game market in which games are created for, and marketed to, boys and girls in equal measure.

Endnotes

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- ⁱ However, this is not to suggest that individuals can change their gender at will. As West and Zimmerman (1987) note, “While it is plausible to contend that gender displays... are optional, it does not seem plausible to say that we have the option of being seen by others as male and female” (130).
- ⁱⁱ Blizzard has introduced a system by which individuals can transfer characters to other servers, but it is not free, and the transfer is not guaranteed.
- ⁱⁱⁱ The exception to the menacing looks of the Horde is the Blood Elf, who looks almost human and is often regarded as one of the sexiest characters in the game. However, blood elves were not available in the original release, and were only made available after the release of the expansion pack in 2007 (3 years after the original release). It is possible that the race was included to bolster the ranks of the Horde, especially since the lack of players choosing Horde characters is often anecdotally attributed to the fact that the Horde races just aren't as “pretty” as the Alliance races.
- ^{iv} For a more detailed description of the game, visit Blizzard's site dedicated to the game (www.worldofwarcraft.com) or the Wikipedia article on the game (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_of_Warcraft). I am aware of the current debate about the scholarly merits of Wikipedia, and thus I did not take lightly the decision to use it as a source for further information. However, it is a much better resource than Blizzard's website, especially for non-gamers. Blizzard uses its informational site as a space for a sales pitch, and as such describes the game in a way that urges one to purchase it. Furthermore, Blizzard's website is written for an audience already familiar with the Warcraft series, the predecessor to WoW. Wikipedia is a much more accessible resource for the non-gamer not familiar with the Warcraft series, and is descriptive in a way that serves to inform about the product as opposed to sell it.
- ^v The groups advertised in were “Chicks for World of Warcraft,” “I'm a Girl and I play WoW (World of Warcraft),” and “All girls who play world of warcraft.”
- ^{vi} “Primarily” in this context is defined as having no character over level 20 for the other faction.
- ^{vii} I use the example of MySpace because it was brought up by my respondents, but the same could be said of profiles on any social networking sites.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live?
3. What is your race?
4. What is your sexual orientation?
5. What kind of girl would you describe yourself to be? (really girly, somewhat girly, tomboy)
6. How long have you been playing the game?
7. Tell me about your characters (race, class, gender, level)
8. What server do you play on?
9. Do you play any other games (computer or console)?
10. Have you ever played any games made for girls (Barbie Fashion Designer, etc.)

General Information

1. How did you get into playing the game?
2. Which character(s) is your favorite?
3. What is your favorite thing to do in the game (questing, cooking, raiding, chatting...)

Guilds

1. Are you part of a guild? Is it a casual guild, or a hardcore guild?
2. What is your job in the guild (if any)?
3. What is your status in the guild? Are you involved in coordinating raids/instances/etc.
4. How are you treated by your fellow guild members?

Gender Presentation

1. Do you tell other people in the game that you are female?
 1. Do you tell people in casual, pick-up groups?
 2. Do you tell guild members?
2. What is the reaction you get when you tell people you are a girl?
 1. Is the reaction the same regardless of which character you are currently playing?
3. How do people treat you once they know?
4. How has VOIP changed the game?
5. Do you ever pretend not to be a girl?
 1. How come?
6. Do you ever over-emphasize your gender?
 1. How come?

Perceptions of Gender in the Game

1. How do you think girls are treated who play the game?
 1. How are they treated online?
 2. How are they treated offline?
2. Do you think there are advantages/disadvantages to being a girl in the game?
3. Do you think people care whether or not a player is a girl?
4. An author of an article I read thought that women were allowed to succeed in corporations as long as they didn't make the men look bad. Do you think the same applies to WoW?
5. Do you think the game was designed for men, women, or a combination of both?

6. Do you do things online that you don't do offline?
End: Is there anything else you would like to share that I didn't cover?

APPENDIX B: WORLD OF WARCRAFT STUDY CONSENT FORM

I am Sara Bassett, a student at the University of San Francisco, and I am conducting research on the experiences of girls and women who play World of Warcraft. Your interview will help gain more in-depth knowledge about WoW's female players, specifically their beliefs about whether or not gender matters in the game, and if so how.

This interview is entirely optional, and disagreeing to the interview will not negatively affect your account with Blizzard Entertainment, your characters, or any other aspect of game play.

This study is not connected with Blizzard entertainment in any way, and agreeing to take part in the study will not entitle you to any in-game rewards, including gold, items, or increased stats.

With your permission, I will record our interview using Ventrilo. I will also be taking notes during the interview. By agreeing to the interview, you agree to both of these recording methods, as well as to having your statements used in an academic paper. By agreeing to have your statements used, you acknowledge that such statements may be used in published versions of the paper, including (but not limited to) any publication in scholarly journals, as well as any form of online publication.

You have the option to be referred to by a name other than your own. You also have the option to be referred to by your offline legal name, the name of one of your mains, or both. If you choose to use your own name, you acknowledge that it may be possible for people to trace your identity if you use said name on any online forums, especially forums related to the game. If you decide not to use any of your names, you have the option of picking a pseudonym for yourself.

How would you like to be referred to in the paper?

Please answer all questions to the best of your ability and feel free to add any additional information that relates to our discussion, even if I don't specifically ask about it in a question. Also, please feel free to ask me to clarify any questions you do not fully understand. You are welcome to skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable or that you would rather not answer for any reason.

If you have any questions after the interview, please feel free to contact me via phone at (916) 747-6671, or via email at sjbassett@gmail.com. If you have any comments/questions/other feedback about this interview that you think my advisor should be made aware of, please feel free to contact her, Stephanie Sears, at the University of San Francisco. She can be reached via phone at (415) 422-5482 or via email at sdsears@usfca.edu.

Do you agree to participate in the research study, as well as to all of the above terms?

Yes No

Where can I send an electronic copy of this agreement so you will have one for your records?

Thank you. We can now move on to the interview.

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