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Playing in Drag: A Study on Gender In Virtual and Non-Virtual Gaming

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Abstract

This project explores hybrid avatar identities and gender through an analysis of how players navigate gender in games that are popularly considered to be "for women only" or "for men only". It also considers the choice of avatar gender that players make in game, and their reasons for making that choice. Finally, it looks at the reported experiences of playing characters of both genders in online visually rich immersive game environments, as well as leaner table-top RPG play. Using Butler's gender trouble, we analyze how gender in gameplay can be both like and unlike drag performance. We also use the frame of gender trouble to consider the question of whether players who openly play games contrary to social expectations, or play an avatar of a different gender, are engaging in a transgressive act. Data was collected through a discourse analysis of online forums, participant observation, and auto-ethnographic reflection. We found that when the act of play itself is transgressive, there are opportunities to reach a community with a message that challenges dominant ideas of gender. However, the reasons why people choose to play a specific game or avatar within that game are very complex and the content of the game, along with the reasons people choose a gendered avatar as well as how they relate to that avatar, both support and subvert dominant gender norms.

Author Keywords

Gender-swapping, Avatar Identity, Gender, Table-top Gaming, Video Games, Gender trouble, Drag, *The Sims*, *World of Warcraft*

Introduction

Game based gender-swapping, alternatively described as sex-swapping, is the choice to play the alternate gender in game than the one assigned to you in your non-virtual life (Jenson, et al, 2015). To date, most of the recent research on gender-swapping has focused on player reportage of why they choose to play a different gender than that of their non-virtual lives (Song & Jung, 2015; Chou, Lo, & Teng, 2014; Martey et al, 2014; Paik & Shi, 2013; Bergstrom, Jenson & DeCastell, 2012; Boudreau, 2007). Extending previous research, this paper works to develop a deep contextual analysis on how players experience their own identity while gender-swapping in tabletop and digital role playing environments. Using Butler's (1990) discussion of gender trouble and drag performance, this research considers how gender-swapping in games does, or does not, trouble dominant heteronormative constructions of gender. In so doing, it builds on a rich and growing body of work concerned with the critical analysis of gender in games. This paper begins with a consideration of how identity, and particularly hybrid avatar identity, can create an environment for understanding in-game gender-swapping as drag. Next, it draws upon the results of auto-ethnographic reflection, participant observations and a discourse analysis of popular forums for three different games: World of Warcraft (WoW), *The Sims*, and the tabletop role playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (DnD). Finally, the paper will consider all of these experiences as a complex interplay of different forces, which serve to both reinforce hegemonic norms in some ways, while also transgressing them in others. Though the three games are quite different, common themes emerge, showing that while game culture is problematic - starting with the text or mechanics of the games themselves - resistant discourses still appear, but have a way to go before substantive gender trouble can occur.

Gender Trouble in Drag and Popular Culture

While sex-swapping has become an important way to describe the adoption of differently sexed or gendered avatars (Jenson et al, 2015), we use gender-swapping quite deliberately in this paper since we are looking to apply Butler's ideas of gender trouble to a gaming environment. In her foundational work, Judith Butler drew from the work of Michel Foucault (1980) to highlight the ways that gender socialization arises out of discourses, including the language we use when speaking to each other, but also including fashion, popular culture, and education. In Butler's view, every time we act according to taken-for granted assumptions about gender, we are performing our gender, and thus reinforcing a heteronormative (and often patriarchal) concept of what men and women should be (1990). However, since gender performance can reinforce existing assumptions and power imbalances, it also has the power to transgress them. In particular Butler highlighted the transgressive nature of the practice of drag performance within the queer community, and suggested that one of the reasons why drag tends to make some people uncomfortable is because it transgresses dominant discourses, showing gender as socialized rather than innate (Brehm, 2013; Hennen, 2004). This practice, Butler suggested, "troubles" gender (1990), however, critics have argued that drag as gender performance has limited discursive power, and is ineffective at creating any real moral or social change (Nussbaum, 1999).

Outside of drag performance, gender transgressions have been widely documented in popular culture such as books (Arjmandi, 2015; Marotte, 2013; Shams & Pourgiv, 2013) film (Amini & Azizmohammadi, 2014; Happel & Esposito, 2013; Cheung & Gibson, 1993), music (Schmutz &

Faupel, 2010; Werner, 2009; Rodger, 2004) television (Weber, 2014; Douglas, 2008), and theatre (O'Leary, 2005; Charles, 1997). It has also been argued that role playing game environments like *World of Warcraft* offer a unique opportunity to transgress gender norms, since they allow avatars of both genders to complete the same quests, and allow any player to create an avatar with a gender of their own choosing (Eklund, 2011). In that sense, gaming can be an act that players feel can trouble gender on a personal level, but for play to be similar to drag performance in a butlerian sense, it must resonate beyond the personal experience of the gamer. The unique and hybrid identity of a player and their avatar in games, on the surface, certainly seems to offer the potential for such transgressions to take place.

Identity and Gender in Gaming

Studies have shown that in games which offer avatar customization, or player choice, people tend to bond more with their avatar due to the fact that they spend more time creating it, thus feeling a sense of pride (Teng, 2010; Ducheneaut, Wen, Yee & Wadley, 2009; Wolfendale, 2007). In addition, players tend to build a lasting connection to their character or avatar that then affects their emotions, for example, when an avatar dies a player may feel real and embodied sorrow for the loss (Coulson, Barnett, Ferguson & Gould, 2012; Wolfendale, 2007). Players may feel stress, fear or an adrenaline response when confronting an in-game boss or enemy (Song & Jung, 2015), and feel real love and arousal when interacting romantically with others in a virtual environment, leading some to successful real-life romantic encounters offline with people who they met in-game (Turkle, 1995). This connection can be troubling for those playing for fantasy reasons or in order to experience a life they feel they cannot lead, mainly due to the fact that when they are strongly connected to their character, and that character is attacked for not being "real" because it is gender-swapped, the player themselves can feel hurt (Wolfendale, 2007).

Some players choose to gender-swap to avoid problems in-game and allow for smoother gameplay (Chou, Lo & Teng, 2014). In games like *World of Warcraft*, for example, cisgendered females sometimes choose male avatars to avoid misogyny within the game and cisgendered males sometimes choose to play female avatars to attract attention and elicit more positive responses from other players (Jenson et al, 2015; Chou, Lo & Teng, 2014). In addition, gender-swapping has also been found to be popular for players who want to experience an identity they cannot experience in their non-virtual life, also known as playing in fantasy (Jenson et al, 2015; Chou et al, 2014; Boudreau, 2012, 2007). For instance, research by Huh and Williams (2010) reported that gay male players tended to gender swap in WoW statistically more often than their straight counterparts, as this action allowed them some freedom with respect to their online identities. On the other hand, many players choose to play gender-swapped characters due to the look and feel of the character (Todd, 2012). MacCallum-Stewart (2008) showed that many male players report choosing a female avatar based on aesthetics (they'd rather look at a female body for hours than a male one). In this case avatar gender choice arguably just reinforces existing gender norms (the female as the object for male desire in this case) rather than subverting them.

Transgressive Avatars in Mainstream Gaming

Video game imagery has been subject to critique for the way it portrays both men and women in a hypermasculine or hypersexualized way, respectively (Brehm, 2013). Researchers have also examined the small ways that games can transgress even their own tropes. For example, in her work on the iconic character Lara Croft of the *Tomb Raider* franchise, Schleiner (2001) showed

how the insertion of a female avatar, Laura Croft, into the typically masculine storyline of looting, killing and adventuring, puts the character of Croft into a sort of "drag" in order to transgress dominant ideas of masculinity and femininity. Similarly, in a discursive analysis of the game *Silent Hill 2*, Kirkland (2009) showed the ways that "throughout the *Silent Hill* series, many aspects associated with [heteronormative] video game masculinity are undermined" (p. 178). Despite these findings, however, other research has shown that the portrayal of sexualized or stereotypically gendered female characters in games can reinforce gender norms, particularly for women, that are unhealthy and unattainable (Martey et al, 2014; Brehm, 2013; Todd, 2012; Schroder, 2008). Furthermore, other studies have shown that despite what might occur in the text of a game, marginalization of female gamers exists in a gaming community that considers itself to be predominantly masculine, forming a self-perpetuating cycle of heteronormative masculinity in the game community (Linderoth & Ohrn, 2014; Brehm, 2013; Bryce & Rutter, 2005).

Games and Gender Trouble

As seen in Schleiner's (2001) analysis above, research on drag performance shows some similarities with studies of gender-swapping in video games. For example, research conducted by Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro (2010) found that drag queens and drag kings would choose gender because they wanted to experience the difference of living that life (Rupp et al, 2010). Similarly, drag as gender transgression can be seen in some reported experiences of video gameplay. For example interviews with female WoW players from Sweden, Eklund (2011) found that though most female players tend to choose female avatars, they view their play as an act of gender transgression, since they know their female avatar will have the same attributes as a male avatar with respect to speed, strength, and ability to complete traditionally masculine tasks such as battle. These findings are echoed by Todd (2012), who used Butler to understand the experiences of female gender-swapping in online. This research showed that online avatar-based experimentation can both transgress and also reinforce dominant norms. Similarly, our research looks at this issue in relation to three different games, in both a digital and analog context, to explore the complexity of social gaming norms, gender expression and hybrid avatar identities.

Methods

This research looks at how players understand their own gender relative to that of their avatar within three different game environments: *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims*, and the table-top RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*. Adapting Harvey and Fisher (2015) we analyze a series of different texts, including in this case, game forums, participant observation, and our own auto-ethnographic experience of gameplay in order to collect data, which we then apply a critical discourse analysis framework (Pulos, 2015; Silcock, Payne & Hocking, 2016).

Data collection: Forums

Discourse analysis has been used previously in various game studies research (Kirkland, 2009; Steinkuehler, 2006). For example, Constance A. Steinkuehler (2006) used a discourse analysis of massive multiplayer online games to show how language use can offer clues to player identity. With a similar goal, this research examines discussions of gender on popular gaming forums. Given that a critical discourse analysis captures broad context and feelings related to the players and the role of gender in a larger sense (Pulos, 2013) it allows us to validate and understand the data we gain via participant observation and Auto-ethnographic reflection. For this research, data was gathered from four different game related forums: The official battle.net *World of Warcraft*

forums[1], the official Sims forums[2], the forums from the popular gaming website "Giant Bomb"[3], and the RPG.net forums[4], a site that caters to table top role playing gamers. In each case, keyword searches for "gender" and "gender swap" were used to find forums relevant to gender and gender choices in the game environment. All of the relevant forums were thoroughly analyzed and themed to find posts relevant to gender and gender trouble, with the most relevant themes discussed below in comparison to the participant observation and auto-ethnographic data.

Data Collection: Auto-ethnographic reflection and participant observation

Auto-ethnographic reflection and participant observation during gameplay in *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims* and Tabletop RPG *Dungeons & Dragons* were used to understand and reflect on gender in gaming at a very personal and contextual level unavailable through other forms of inquiry (Downey, 2012). Though both authors have been long time players of the games discussed in this research, formal participant observation and auto-ethnographic reflection was conducted for a period of six months. Pamela Livingstone conducted formal participant observation and auto-ethnographic reflection of tabletop RPG *Dungeons & Dragons* from January to June 2015. During this time, she also discussed gender and avatar identity informally with the other players, data which was kept in detailed notes with the participant observation. Both researchers conducted participant observation of *The Sims* (Pamela) and *World of Warcraft* (Jaigris Hodson) from September 2015 to February 2016. In addition, Jaigris offers former experience as a drag performer to enhance understanding of how gender in games can be understood as a gender performance in Butlerian terms. These methods of participant observation and auto-ethnographic reflection draw from Boudreau's (2007) work on hybrid avatar identities. They add an important level of immersion for the reader, using personal accounts to illuminate the experience of avatar identity on a different level.

Foucauldian CDA:

Once the data was collected from forums, notes on gameplay and personal reflection, we analyzed each using Foucauldian Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Silcock, Payne & Hocking, 2016). Since our aim was to determine whether we could find evidence of gender trouble in our data, and since Butler's theories of gender trouble draw from Foucauldian ideas of subjectivity and discursive power (1980), we felt that Foulcauldian CDA represented the right tool for the job. As such, we wanted to determine how gendered subjectivity could be created and also potentially troubled through discourse, and were looking to the data for "surfaces of emergence, which are the sites or contexts where certain discourses become visible" (Silcock, Payne & Hocking, 2016, p. 89). As such, the forum data can reveal how the experiences of gender swapping in participant observation of gameplay and auto-ethnographic reflection are created discursively in a broader gameplay culture. Just as in other CDA methods applied to gaming (Pulos, 2013; Mayer, Warmelink & Zhou, 2016), a Foucauldian CDA takes into account the broader cultural and contextual environment which produces the discourse, the obstacles to change, the ideological assumptions that shape the discourse and the places in which the discourse can be resisted and or subject to challenge (Fairclough, 2001; Pulos, 2013). Taking all these factors into account, we read through the data and applied our analytical lens following Silcock, Payne and Hocking (2016), meaning that through writing, discussion, and reflection we identified dominant discourses (or themes) in our data, which support an overarching discourse of normative gender within the gaming culture, but also offer occasional opportunities for resistant discourses to emerge.

Results

Gender in Warcraft: A contested battleground

Gender-related discussion threads on the *World of Warcraft* forums can be understood via four main discourses: 1) Girls don't play games; 2) The female avatar as a sexual object; 3) Aesthetics and the male gaze; 4) Resistance and reinforcement of cultural gender norms. These discourses function as surfaces of emergence that can be contextualized via participant observation and auto-ethnographic reflection on gameplay. The rest of this section covers each of these themes in turn, and shows how they play out via examples from the forums and our own experience.

Girls don't play games

Gender related discussion on the WoW forums raises the issue of girl gamers, and more specifically, the stereotype that suggests that girls do not play games like *World of Warcraft*. Players mostly experience this when they "out" themselves in the game by using the voice communication platform Ventrillo, also known as "vent". Some players overcome this by not outing themselves at all, such as in the case of one player, who writes:

> I play my real life gender, although I never let people know I am female irl. Whenever I did in the past on my old account, I either heard "Hey baby, you got myspace?" or "Rofl. there are no girls in WoW."

Similarly, another player writes:

> Generally it's not my toon that people get excited about. It's when I get on vent with some of the less mature guilds. I once had someone try to give me a stack of haunting spirits for healing for them, because "I'm a girl".

As shown, even though others in the game seem to be accepting that female players are in the game, they also apply stereotypes, insofar as they expect a female player to play a certain type of character only, in this case a healer. The player responds in this case by choosing to ignore the other players and actively disengage. In general on the forums, when the stereotype of the girl gamer comes up, posters talk about strategies they use to manage their presentation or avoid interactions. This response is understandable, but problematic, as it is only in the act of outing themselves and having these conversations that players can trouble gender in the game and thus create a safer space for each other.

In her research notes and reflection on gameplay, Jaigris's experiences confirm these findings. She writes: "When I play WoW, whether I'm playing a male or a female toon, other players always expect me to be a male player. Even though over 400,000 women play *World of Warcraft*, the stereotype that there are no female players, or few female players still seems to exist."

The female avatar as sexual object

Posters to the WoW forums also discuss the issue of unwanted sexual attention, seen in the post above ("Hey Baby, you got MySpace") but not experienced solely by female players. In fact,

some male players suggested that they don't play female toons because they don't want to be subject to the male gaze. In this case, playing a male toon becomes a way to ignore the issue, similar to the avoidance of voice chat software described above. For example, one player writes:

> I attempted to one time play a female character just to try it. I have always played on Roleplaying realms (Wyrmrest Accord and Argent Dawn). I made a female orc. ... Ran through Death Row, and got a dozen or more whisps from players asking to ERP, and all kinds of other nasty stuff, that I just could not fathom to be a possibility. When replying "sorry i am a guy". I would get: "well your toons a female, so play your role". Well I never thought much about it, put them all on ignore. Went on my way, came back through with my friend, and it all started again. I know they call Silvermoon, Cybermoon for a reason. But I also didnt want to be looked at, as a female. So I deleted the character and haven't made one since.

In response to this idea, others advocate ignoring the unwanted behavior without changing your own avatar selection. Another player writes:

> I have females as well as males in my "stable". They've ALL been "hit on" at various times. If you take any of this seriously, you need a break. I usually chuckle, and move on.

Jaigris has also experienced this type of sexism experienced during gameplay, writing in her research notes:

> I am often hesitant to use audio and voice based communication with new groups of people, because when my voice reveals my 'true' gender, there are often inappropriate comments. Without the audio though, I can be anyone. I am safely anonymous and can just focus on playing the game rather than trying to explain myself to others.

Assuming that bad behavior, or online sexual harassment, is something to be managed or avoided by the female gendered avatar, is of course, highly problematic. It suggests a tacit acceptance of gender norms that assume that women are the gatekeepers of sexual activity, and men cannot control their own sexual urges. As such, the discourse that sexism in games is to be accepted if you have a female avatar and laughed at or ignored absolves both the harassers and the game company from any responsibility in creating a safe space for players of all genders.

Aesthetics and the male gaze

In the forums, three main motivations emerge for gender-swapping: aesthetics, narrative fidelity and gender transgression. First, confirming the literature about gender-swapping in WoW, much of the conversation on gender related WoW forums suggests that male players do (or think they do) play female toons for aesthetic reasons. For example one player writes:

> The conventional wisdom, back in the day, was that, if you had to spend several hours with someone's (pixelated) bottom turned toward you, you should choose one that you find aesthetically pleasing.

And as it turns out, male players aren't the only ones who choose female toons for aesthetic reasons. Female players suggest they play female toons for aesthetics too, for example, another player writes:

> I play a female toon because they look better. Well, this is arguable for trolls, as male trolls are amazing looking, but females are more appealing.

Posts like these accept the idea that the female body is an object to be looked at. However, not every poster to the forum accepts this claim. For example one player challenges the idea of playing a toon for aesthetic purposes with the following post:

> Why aren't you comfortable enough with your sexuality to just admit that you like to play female characters? It's not because you want to stare at your toon's backside. I hate that excuse.

Some posters look at gender as one aspect of creating a character that fits into a story they are developing as they role play in the game. These players don't think about either aesthetics or gender-swapping, but instead focus on narrative fidelity. For example, another player writes:

> Usually, I felt a sort of attachment as I made the character. Down to the hair color, skin color, and name. The name played a huge part in what sex I chose, as well as the sex determining what name I chose. Sometimes, I felt as I made a toon, it was like bringing a character to life within a storyline.

Finally, some posts on the forum confirm Eklund's study, suggesting that even playing a female toon in what is considered to be a male-dominated game world can be an act of gender defiance. Reporting on the fact that male and female characters both level up in the same way and have options of completing the same quests, a player writes:

> It's nice to be a female hero, when the stereotype is always men.

Here we can see how, for some players, games like WoW can allow a type of self-expression that is generally not afforded by other popular culture media. In the game space, a female player can inhabit an avatar that is treated equally to male avatars in the environment of the game; a different experience from one players experience In Real Life (IRL). This represents a personal gender troubling for players, and is one way the mechanics of the game opens up opportunities for gender exploration.

Jaigris struggles with balancing the game-enhanced support of the male gaze with the potential of the plot, revealing the ways the mechanics of the game can both empower and constrain. In her research notes, she writes:

> I HATE it when I level up my gear and my female toon ends up in short shorts or a belly shirt! Why does my female toon's armour shrink when I level up, but my male toon gets bulkier? Only because this game was probably designed by men … [but on the other hand] I'm so glad that my female toon doesn't have different quests or abilities than my

male toon! It's nice to not have to worry that the NPCs will treat me differently when it comes to running into battle - my female is just as badass as any male toon - which sometimes feels almost empowering.

In reasons for gender swapping then, the reality of play is still contested. On one hand, the male gaze drives avatar choice, and is supported by a game that is programmed to level up female avatars with sexy and revealing clothing. On the other hand, female players feel empowered by other mechanics that allow them to quest equally to male characters in game. This, along with the assumption that most WoW gamers are male, makes female players feel like play helps them resist cultural gender norms in a small but significant way.

Resistance and Reinforcement of Cultural Gender Norms
Some posters to the WoW forums use the question of gender-swapping to make statements about gender in the culture at large. Some suggest that creating different characters helps them to reflect on the social construction of a gender binary. For example, a player writes:

> The important thing to recognize is that a lot of the things you think are attached to the male/female construct are actually attached by the society we live in and are not actually native to the sexes. Your characters can be anything you want them to be, and honestly it's silly to try and box a gender into a specific stereotype in order to try and make them more believable. There will always be real life examples of people who break those stereotypes into a thousand pieces, and the sooner you incorporate that into your character building the more realistic and natural those characters will feel.

> There is no box.

Often posts like these are made in response to others who write that they could never play a female character because it's just so difficult to think like a woman. In this we can see small public acts of resistance to a cultural idea that men and women are inherently different, and biologically rather than socially shaped. We also see public resistance to the idea of a gender binary, a discursive challenge of dominant heteronormative rules. Others, however, suggest that this type of challenge can only work in the fantasy space in the game, and even then, does not always hold water because real life bleeds into the game. Another player writes:

> Turns out, the real world preconceptions manage to bust their way into WoW, funnily enough. People are different, from each other i mean. We all have thoughts and feelings and opinions that vary. Of course this carries over in game. The only way it (the gender issue) would ever stop is if we all stop boinking and turn into robots. Until then, boink away, and don't worry so much about what other people think or say. :)

This is another version of the 'ignore the problem' argument seen above, grounded in an idea that sexual characteristics and gender are linked. This theme continues to arise throughout the WoW gender-related forums, and is hotly debated on both sides by an engaged community of posters.

These surfaces of emergence can be understood in conjunction with Jaigris's' experience of playing the game. In her research notes, she writes:

> I know that more women play WoW than men these days, so now every time I see another character, I secretly wonder, who's behind the computer? Then I feel silly for wondering - after all, I know better! It shouldn't matter who is behind the computer if we're experiencing our identities as hybrids, should it?

Gender in The Sims: A fluid environment?

Gender discussion in *The Sims* forums can be grouped into three discourses: Like *World of Warcraft*, the first discourse relates to assumptions about girl gamers. This time, however, it's turned on its head, suggesting that *The Sims* is not a serious game, and so boys do not play it. It is minimized based on the assumption that it is for girls only; gender-swapping is a curiosity, something to do for fun, rather than for the purposes of troubling gender or expressing your true self; and the simultaneous reinforcement and resistance of gender norms presented in the culture at large. Again, these discourses can be viewed as sites of emergence that help to understand the authors' experiences in game.

Boys don't play Sims/Sims is not a serious game

Interestingly, an analysis of gender on the popular gaming forum "Giant Bomb" reveals the opposite assumption to the one demonstrated in WoW forums. A key discussion, entitled "Do Men Play *The Sims*" shows that players experience a bias associated with the fact that the game is not considered to be for serious gamers. This bias manifests itself as a stereotype that only girls play *The Sims*, and boys that play the game must therefore be gay, as demonstrated in this post by a player:

> First off, I want to say I'm a man. I know this might sound weird but here goes. Is it weird that I really like playing The Sims? A lot of people I know say it's gay for a male to play The Sims. What are your thoughts?

Similarly, this post by another player confirms the experienced stereotype:

> The Sims is usually looked down as a "women's game". I honestly do not get why The Sims is "feminine". Either way, I'm playing it, and I'm a man. LOL.

While many forum posts confirm the existence of the girl gamer stereotype, a majority also out themselves as being men who like to play a game marketed to women. This discourse is confirmed by Pamela's experience. She writes in her notes:

> I grew up playing *The Sims* from the young age, however once I started to get older and talk to people about the games I played I felt like I always need to hide my love for *The Sims*. Why? Simply because I would always get people laughing at me or saying I am not a real gamer. I do play a lot of other games considered more masculine, but once someone hears I play *The Sims* I am now a girl gamer who does not know how to play.

The discourse that *The Sims* is a girl's game is one that likely stems from the fact that *The Sims* takes place within the realm of the home - a realm that has traditionally been associated with femininity. This discourse is as problematic as its opposite in WoW; both serve to keep female gamers in their place, and both insinuate that there's a right (read: male) way to game.

Gender-swapping is for fun - and that's all

On multiple *Sims* discussion forums such as the one titled "Gender Swap! How Does Your Sim Look as The Other Gender?", players use character mods to post pictures of their Sim as both male and female. On this forum, players seem to enjoy gender-swapping their sim, with some commenting that the exercise encouraged them to play a different gender than the one they were born with. Community member 'And-its-on' wrote of a sim they gender swapped from female to male:

> I plan on playing him in another town.

There are a few different forums where people post their gender-swapped sims for entertainment purposes, however, the tone of the posts in each of the forums is generally light and gender-swapping is portrayed as a humorous curiosity or a way of seeing what the children of a sim will look like, rather than as an expression of hybrid identity, as in this post by one player who after gender-swapping a female sim, writes:

> I think she looks kinda ugly as a man. I hope she doesn't have any boys.

Contrasting this discourse, Pamela writes:

> The Sims was the first game where I felt like I could embody my characters, trying to figure out what they would do and how they would act while still just playing a game. I would build families and try to create a story and a life for them trying to decide 'if I was them, what would I do' while I played. It was my first experiences of role playing and gender-swapping within games.

In this case, while Pamela plays both male and female sims, and explores different aspects of her own identity with each avatar, her experience is not reflective of the discourses on the forums. Instead, the forum discourse trivializes gender exploration somewhat, while bringing it back to the female domain by making it about seeing what the children produced by each Sim will look like.

Gender in the game and the culture at large

The Sims forums also host discussions of gender stereotypes in the game and how they relate to gender stereotypes in society. In fact, on a forum discussion related to gender stereotypes titled "Plum Gender Stereotypes", the community calls for sim mods to be developed that would allow players to dress their sims in clothes currently only available for specific gendered sims. Alternative discussion on this forum that suggests that some differences between men and women are biological rather than social are actively discouraged by the community, for example, after this post by one player:

There is another part of society that is very tired of the modern day 'woman' wanting no distinction in the genders at all for anything when actually our brains are truly wired very differently. Proven with science. And many, many smarter people than me.

Another member of the community respond with the following:

I don't think anyone here is calling for genetic modification of the sexes. What many people would like is to stop artificially *exaggerating* differences through rigid gender socialization. And, you know, to stop threatening to make people don't conform 100% to your preconceived idea of who they are based on their sex into social pariahs. It's stifling and suffocating to individuals.

In her research notes, Pamela writes:

I find it frustrating when I am building sims and want them to be a certain way but cannot. Sometimes I will build males just because I prefer the way their hair looks and wish I could use those on female sims. Although your female and male character can have the same jobs, and do the same things, they still have to look a certain way. My least favorite game mechanic in *The Sims* has always been female pregnancy. I like to dress my females in pants and shirts but without a doubt every time they get pregnant the game always has them end up dresses and skirts in pink or purple. Why can't she stay in her normal clothes? Why does she always have to conform to the typical woman when she's pregnant? It always bothered me.

Like *World of Warcraft*, *The Sims* naturalizes certain types of gender expression over others. Unlike the Warcraft forums however, we can see some resistance to this practice on *The Sims* forums, suggesting that participants on *The Sims* forums are more aware of the game-based contextual forces that Pamela has experienced during gameplay. Since forum posters are using Sims official forums to discuss this issue, it is reasonable to think that they are calling for more opportunities to transgress gender within the environment of the game, a discursive act that in itself suggests a willingness to challenge dominant assumptions that wasn't seen in the Warcraft forums. On the whole, though, both *The Sims* and *World of Warcraft* have environments and thus gender options that are limited by programming. In contrast, tabletop games - being mainly constructed in the imaginations of players - could offer greater potential for gender exploration. Our analysis of the forums and our own gameplay, however, show that this potential is not yet realized in practice.

Gender in Table-Top RPG: Imagined Communities

Like the discussion on the WoW or Sims forums, discussion on RPG forums takes the forms of two main discourses, with some overlap between them: The reinforcement (and occasional resistance) to gender norms in game; and Men are from Mars and Women are from Venus (normative gender differences as they relate to gender-swapping experience). The rest of this section discusses each of these discourses and, as above, shows how they function as sites of emergence that help contextualize the in-game experiences.

In game mechanics and gender roles
On the RPG forums, the issue of stereotypes for female characters in the game is an issue, and even has an entire discussion thread devoted to exploring it, titled, "[Advice Needed] Female Gamers and RPGs with Defined Gender Roles", where one player asks:

> While I haven't spoken with the female gamer in my group about this yet (it just got too late last night), I was wondering about peoples thoughts were on playing rpgs with defined gender roles with females players. How have the female players reacted to them? Do you avoid such games?

This question provoked a variety of responses, from people who indicate they simply won't play RPGs with defined gender roles, and others stating they would simply play a male character in these types of games. Other commenters suggest they would consider playing these games but only after being warned or having a discussion about the issue so they were prepared for the limitations of the game. When forum participants indicated they would play the game, their reasoning is often couched in ideas of role playing, as though the normative gender roles are warranted by the narrative of the game, such as one player, who writes:

> I think that if you're in a "feudal" style setting, then even if the female PC is exceptional, there should be resistance and skepticism to her. To me that's not a bad thing. Every character should have to deal with cultural resistance from time to time, I think. Whether that's the claim they are "mercenaries" and looked down on, or the cultures they pass through view them as outsiders and are suspicious of them. Or fear of magic-users or authoritarian knights (etc.).
>
> Gender is one more way to bring conflict into the game. And the way the PC handles conflict is important in developing who they are. So if the PC wants to try to escape gender roles, great. Let them deal with the consequences of the attempt on the way. If the PC wants to use gender roles to their advantage...well fun can be found there too, IMHO.

Most posters to the forum, however, seem to find agency in refusing to play campaigns in which rigidly defined gender roles cannot be subverted. Like *The Sims* discourses, there is a suggestion that in a fantasy world, one should be able to subvert or overcome the norms and limitations present in day-to-day life, and that the game is a place where aspiration takes precedence over physical reality, as long as the game narrative hangs together.

In her experience of tabletop gaming, and her research notes, Pamela notes:

> As a girl tabletop RPGer I have mixed feelings. On one hand I feel welcomed because there are people who do not focus on gender and tabletop RPGS are more about narrative, however on the other hand I feel like a rare breed. Given that many people still think of the stereotype of young socially awkward men sitting in the basement playing DnD I feel out of place when I talk to people about playing DnD because I'm a female.

Pamela's experience of the game being about narrative is one that is commonly discussed on the forums. However, this discourse may obscure the fact that the narrative or story of the game may

actually reinforce hegemonic gender norms. In this sense, the story of the game becomes, like the programming in *World of Warcraft* or *The Sims*, a way to encourage certain gender performances over others, another discourse that reinforces male and female roles.

Men are from Mars...
RPG forum posts relating to gender-swapping range from the normative - I could never do it because I don't understand the opposite gender - to a more inclusive idea that all people are basically the same so that gender doesn't matter. Some players comment that they hardly notice gender because they are so involved in the narrative. Many suggest that if gender is played in a stereotypical or awkward way, they find it to be jarring or off putting. But responses such as these suggest there is a correct and therefore incorrect way of performing gender, an idea which invites serious critique.

One discussion thread titled "Why Do Some People Play Characters of a Different Gender?" explores player motivations for in-game gender-swapping. Here, forum participants list a variety of motivations for gender-swapping that are aligned with the reasons given on the Warcraft forums, namely: exploring a fantasy, building a narrative within a story, identification with the alternate gender, aesthetics, enjoyment (or playing a differently gendered character is more fun), and also the above mentioned idea that one cannot play an alternate gendered character because it is too difficult to understand people who do not share the same subjectivity that you do. There is some evidence of members of the community challenging certain taken for granted notions of gender normativity. For example, in response to a poster who writes that they cannot play a character that has a different gender than their own, one player writes,

> Every single time I have seen someone fail at playing someone of the other gender, it is because they treated them as an alien.

And in response to the same post, a player writes:

> This is an objection I don't get - I interact with women all the time, and I certainly don't find their behavior any more mysterious than I do other men's. Getting into a character's skin involves discarding spooky metaphysical queries like "how would a woman act in this situation?" in favor of "how would this woman act in this situation?"

In her research notes, Pamela reports:

> I have come to realize that gender in tabletop is not as noticeable as video games because it is not visually in your face which I find gives you more leeway in to building up a character and creating someone you want to play, however, in my participant observation, a gender or other physical attribute that was very different from that of the person playing the character was often met with surprise from the group. Despite the game as a narrative medium, we are often tied to our cultural assumptions.

In this discourse, we see an assumption that men and women are inherently biologically different, and thus a man could never play a woman, since they "couldn't possibly" understand how a woman might think. Fortunately, however, the forums show an active resistance to this

discourse of difference, a small but significant challenge that is meaningful because it challenges the dominant discourse without encoding a different and equally problematic assumption in its place.

Discussion

Taken together, our data confirms what previous researchers such as Shaw (2013), Boudreau (2012), Eklund (2011), and Turkle (1995) have shown, namely that in games players adopt identities that bleed into their avatar and in-game RPG narratives. Like Todd (2012), our analysis of forum posts related to gender-swapping reveals a host of competing discourses which, while they mostly support, occasionally transgress normative gender ideals. Game related stereotypes and the sexualization of female characters or avatars combine to create a culture of normative violence (Butler, 1990) that intrudes on the game from the broader culture at large. This culture serves to silence the female voice in many instances during gameplay. However, the discourse, as we would expect, invites its opposite, or rather leaves space for resistance. Players on the forums attempt to challenge normative gender discourses, though often the resistance fails to challenge some of the most problematic of the game's own mechanics related to gender and sexual normativity. Finally, confirming Eklund's (2011) work, we can see that sometimes the act of play for women in *Warcraft* or men in *The Sims*, can trouble gender on a personal level, offering a feeling of gender empowerment for the players even when they do not gender swap.

Stereotypes and Normative Violence

Powerful discourses still exist in the gaming community that ghettoize girl gamers into specific games or platforms that are considered to be less serious than games that boys like to play (Jenson & de Castell, 2008). These discourses construct a stereotype that is confirmed in the forums and by our gaming experience: the idea that girls don't play *World of Warcraft*, and boys don't play *The Sims* despite the fact that survey data shows otherwise (Schramm, 2009). This type of discourse is a type of normative violence according to Butler (1990), or rather, a violence of norms. In this case the norm is that certain games are more serious than others and therefore not appropriate for or popular with female gamers. This, in turn, keeps women from trying the game at all, or encourages a culture in which they feel like they'd rather not reveal their gender.

When players start to experience their identity as a hybrid and thus become attached to their character or avatar, they get hurt when something negative happens (Song, & Jung, 2015). This emotional attachment then can lead to feelings of anger and sadness when someone does not accept the gender swapped character or causes them to feel unsafe in game. For this reason, our forum participants adopt strategies to avoid being "found out". This was confirmed both by the forum text and also by our own experiences in game, and shows that there is still so far to go with respect to achieving in-game gender parity, or even fluidity.

Sexualized Avatars and Hegemonic Masculinity

Sexually suggestive chat in *World of Warcraft*, or discussing whether a gender swapped sim is hot or not is both an example of normative violence and also an example of the way negative gender stereotypes are reinforced through the sexualization of female avatars (Martey et al, 2014; Todd, 2012; Schroder, 2008). Our data shows both female and male players adopting this stance, with sexually suggestive content being mostly directed towards female toons or sims no matter what the gender of the player. Similarly, when people post to a forum stating they genderswap

because they prefer to look at a female body rather than a male one, they are justifying what could be considered non-normative behavior (gender-swapping) with a very normative claim to the female body as an object to be looked at. This calls for an analysis of gender-swapping motivations beyond the argument of aesthetics as detailed in MacCallum-Stewart's (2008) study. The male gaze is supported through the mechanics and programming of a game like *World of Warcraft*, and as we can see on the RPG forums is often written into tabletop RPGs. When sexualized avatars or gender stereotypes are thus encoded into in-game discourses, a normative subjectivity is reinforced. While this subjectivity is subjected to critique on the forums, there really is no way to subvert it and still play the game, the choice is play the game and conform, or choose not to play at all.

Silencing the Female (or genderqueer) voice

Our participant observation and Auto-ethnographic reflection is supported by the discourses on the forums which reveal a culture of silence for female players in WoW or tabletop RPGs when they are confronted with the violence of norms and sexualization of female avatars described above. In general, in-game and on the forums, we can see a technique that female players use to deal with gender stereotypes, antisocial behavior, and the violence of norms described above is to simply play elsewhere, not play at all, or not out themselves on audio chat. This strategy is both understandable and also problematic, since marginalized gamers cannot be expected to advocate for themselves in a hostile discursive environment (Shaw, 2013).

It is not for the sexualized or genderfluid players to confront gender stereotypes in the forums. Instead, a culture needs to be created where they do not have to do so because everyone in the community is requesting change. Instead, the activity on the forums and in our own participant observation and auto-ethnographic reflection shows that the general culture is not one of demanding a safe gaming space for all bodies, but instead instruction to ignore the problem, perpetuating the game as a male-dominant space (Bryce & Rutter, 2005). This is a type of silence that reveals and reinforces power (Foucault, 1980).

Hybrid identities and in game gender trouble

Despite the problematic aspects of gaming culture and in-game narratives that bleed into the gameplay experience in each of the three games we examined, there is some support for the idea that hybrid identities within the game space open up opportunity for gender trouble. In particular this can be seen on the forums where some players actively challenge gender roles both within games and outside of them. This seems to fit into the kinds of discursive action recommended by Shaw (2013). Here we see, amongst the voices that minimize bad behavior, a small community of people from both within and outside marginalized gaming communities challenge gender stereotypes and also challenge the gamer space as predominantly masculine. There is evidence of vocal support for gender fluidity, and a growing acceptance of the presence of female gamers. Additionally, in comments on motivation for gender-swapping, we see players who step up to challenge discourses of dominant masculinity and avatar sexualization, sometimes with a joke or lighthearted rebuke, and other times in a much more serious way.

The discourse on the forums, and our own in-game experiences, confirm work by researchers such as Eklund (2011), Todd (2012) and Schleiner (2001), who suggest that avatar gender-swapping does not tell the whole story of in-game gender trouble or game-as-drag. In games

considered to be stereotypically for girls (games like *The Sims* which encompass the domestic space) or for boys (games with fighting like *World of Warcraft*) being opposite the assumed gender and openly playing the game is itself an act of discursive transgression. Furthermore, when avatar gender-swapping is considered in addition to gendered gameplay, there is a wide spectrum of opportunities to trouble gender in different contexts. When players deconstruct gender on the forums, they too seem to recognize this fact. This should, in theory be a positive, albeit small step forward.

Finally, our research also supports the idea of hybrid identities as a venue for transgressing a gender binary. The experience of an in-game hybrid identity seems to open people up to understanding or experiencing empathy with others who they may not have considered previously (Boudreau, 2012, 2007; Turkle, 1995). Our findings suggest that this is true in both virtual online game space and in analog games as well. When a player gets a chance to embody a character they get the chance to build a stronger connection and feel like that character is a part of them (Turkle, 1995). In that sense, hybrid identities have the potential to trouble gender more than other popular culture media such as films, music or television. Unlike traditional media, games are interactive, and allow players to speak with one another and inhabit the body of their avatar (Todd, 2012). In this way, they are more like a drag performance, and thus offer a uniquely transgressive potential (Rupp, Taylor & Shapiro, 2010; Schleiner, 2001). This opens up a world in which players are not bound to one story, but create their own, including a "hero" character that can step outside a gendered script and achieve more. For this to really become a reality, however, there needs to be more opportunities for players to embody gender fluid characters, and there needs to be a gaming community that supports open exploration - a tall order in post-#gamergate culture.

The limits of discursive action

Despite the potential of games to help players trouble gender, it is important to note that there are still major hurdles to be overcome in dominant masculinity and gamer culture. As seen in recent events such as #gamergate, there remains a dominant and destructive culture concerned with making online space, and in particular game space, unsafe for people who identify as female. While there are promising discourses occurring on gaming forums, we must recognize that these game forums and in game discourses are not yet really queering mainstream game culture or the taken-for granted but patently wrong assumptions about girl gamers. On the other hand, as more voices recognize gaming and gamers in a variety of different forms, the authors hope that new safe spaces for marginalized gamers will result, and thus while there is still a long way to go, spaces for troubling gender like the forums or the in-game environments/campaigns themselves, are an important first step.

Conclusion

Building identity in games has been shown to be a complex process. With the bleeding of non-virtual with virtual lives, players have found themselves taking ownership of who and what they play, feeling connected to the game and the act of gender-swapping. Gender choice in games has become a way for players to experience a fantasy world. Many players find themselves feeling a connection and blending their virtual and non-virtual lives together when playing a gender swapped player. However, many gender-swapping players experience harmful stereotypes and normative discourses that trump any empowerment they may feel while playing.

As shown in our results, in-game gender swapping does not yet trouble gender. This is mainly due to the silencing and normative discourses surrounding it. There are still strong stereotypes out there that believe there are games "for men" and "for women". However, on a personal level for players, the ability to experience a hybrid avatar identity that sometimes transgresses acceptable gender norms is powerful. With such strong visuals and gamer representation pushing gender into their social norms, it is nice to see that some people are trying to challenge gender norms. To them this is small act of resistance to the dominant discourses on the forums and suggests that there is at least a small community of resistance and that there are people who are supporting this resistance. As characters that transgress gender norms begin to become more prevalent in mainstream popular culture, it is our hope that personal in-game gender expression can come out of the closet and allow players to openly experience the fluidity that is possible in a fantasy world in a supportive environment.

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