

GAME ON GIRL: IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION
IN DIGITAL RPGS

By

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of ELIZABETH REGINA MCMENOMY find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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To everyone reading this: Game on!

GAME ON GIRL: IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION
IN DIGITAL RPGS

Abstract

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This dissertation explores the connections between identity and gaming, essentially asking the question “What does it mean to be a gamer?” to a population not often associated with the stereotypical gamer. Although much industry research indicates that women are the fastest growing group of gamers, many people still associate gaming with masculine identities. This research challenges those stale stereotypes and demonstrates that gaming is often a place of agency and power for women, offering an equal playing field that patriarchal societies rarely afford to women. Each chapter looks at a different aspect of gaming culture that emerged from interviews conducted with 30 women gamers. Research participants were eager to share their experiences gaming, having already considered how many of the questions asked about how gender impacted game play and their own identities. Many ideas about how being a woman gamer impacts identity in both online and offline arenas are discussed, including the performance of gender in digital role playing games, and a new typology for online gamers is created.

This project’s observations are not limited to the ideas brought forth by the participants. The closing chapter calls into question gaming culture in its broader considerations, declaring gaming is no longer part of a subculture but rather is moving forward into mainstream culture.

That women gamers are such a large and growing population in gaming brings this idea to the forefront and challenges the stereotypes often associated with gamers. Ultimately, this study shows that digital role playing games and the women who play them have an important place in American culture.

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Dedication

For my dad, who always let me play.

For my mom, who believes I can do anything.

Here is the proof.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION:

Performing the Game: Representations of Women Gamers Online

Christmas 1987: I received an Apple IIe as a gift from my parents. It wasn't a surprise since we had discussed ahead of time the kind of computer I wanted. We were using these computers in my programming class at my public junior high and I was learning programming basics at that time. My mom, always the bargain hunter, was really delighted with the purchase because the guy who owned it before me had ramped up the memory so that it would run faster.

It came with all the bells and whistles of the time: the 5 1/4 inch disk drive, black screen, green print monochrome monitor, and a dot matrix printer. And there was a bonus. The guy who sold it to my mom sent along all the software he owned and included in that mix was Zork, The Great Underground Empire.

Our family already owned another home computer; a Commodore Vic 20 that plugged into the TV. I could play rudimentary games on that system and also learn some basics of computer programming. Often, the games on this computer became family activities where my mom and dad would actively participate in helping me get through the games. It was, of course, hooked up to the one TV we had in the house, kept in the "family room," so to play anytime when my father wasn't at work was to engage the entire family. There was a Zork-like game included with this early computer that quickly became a family favorite as the puzzles and their solutions kept us all interested.

But approaching Zork on my own with this new, faster, more sophisticated computer that was kept in my bedroom was a liberating experience. I ventured off alone into the underground empire and my adventures were mine alone; no longer were the computer or the computer games I played family affairs. This provided me a fair amount of freedom – freedom within the game, freedom from my family life, and with that a sense of responsibility I had only experienced on rare occasions. I could travel where I wanted within the game without parents or friends and without fear. I was a lone adventurer, with my trusty lantern and sword that glowed blue when danger was near, facing this unknown reality and making it my own.

Days after I had set up the computer, I was up well past my bedtime when my father came in to see what I was doing. He watched me for a few minutes simply staring at the computer screen. I was stuck at some point in the game and wasn't sure how to proceed. He leaned over and said to me, "You don't need to solve the whole game in one night, Regina."

My relationship to computer games continues to be a variation on the events of that night and that first game I played on my own. My desire to figure out and understand the story, the game, its purpose and mission, and my role as the adventurer, has driven my desire to play computer games. Throughout my undergraduate degree, I spent entire summers and breaks playing Role Playing Games (RPGs) like Zork or Myst or First Person Shooters (FPS) like Doom. At different points in my life I've played a plethora of different types of computer games, each having a specific role in my life at the time I played them. The draw toward computer games is multifaceted for me; there is the immediate challenge of solving the puzzle or conquering the quest, and the sense of gratification that comes with finishing the game. And even though I am also an avid board and card game player, the immediacy of solving games and puzzles online, the instant gratification of knowing I "bested" the computer, keeps me returning

to the screen for more. As I began the research for this project, I wondered if other women experienced the same kind of multifaceted attraction to gaming. As this dissertation will show, I was not disappointed.

As I sit here now, at a machine that is at least 100 times as powerful as my Apple IIe, I wonder at the time and energy I still spend in front of a screen covered with letters. The games I play now are significantly more sophisticated, where it is not me alone with my computer screen and a bunch of text but rather a community of players from around the world who embrace the online realities of MMO (Massively Multi-player Online) games like World of Warcraft, Dungeons and Dragons, and Eve Online, each with their own distinct personality and environmental flavor. During my early time in my graduate program, most of my time was spent playing solitaire or Scrabble-like word games online, sometimes alone and sometimes versus friends on social networking sites like Facebook. This decision to play solitaire-like games that I could easily end came after discovering that I could not play MMOs and survive my graduate coursework because of the time investment demanded by active participation and achievement in an MMO.

However, something interesting happened when I started interviewing women for this dissertation; I realized this self-imposed gaming seclusion left me out of the gaming loop. By removing myself from the MMO world, I was moving too far away from my subject pool, and this dissertation would no longer be an auto-ethnography. In order to feel like an effective researcher participant, I needed to go back into the gaming world and fully engage with it in order to better connect with the women I interviewed. This required a great amount of balance and time management on my part but also reminded me why I started this research in the first place: I love to game and I missed playing. To feel like an active participant researcher, I felt the

need to level my own character in the game that sparked my interest in this research in the first place, World of Warcraft (WoW). “Leveling” a character consists of completing in-game tasks, often referred to as quests, completing dungeons or instances with a group, and killing monsters or other Non-Playable Characters (NPCs) for experience points (XP). Each level of the game consists of a preset number of experience points the player has to accumulate in order to advance to the next level. Each quest is worth a set number of XP and the player’s total XP and progress to the next level is tracked by a bar at the bottom of the game screen. Having removed myself from the online gaming world during my coursework, I never finished leveling my first character and felt I lacked a certain amount of “gamer cred” that would help me experience the sense of mastery many participants discussed during the interviews.

During the year I conducted interviews for this research, I went back to playing World of Warcraft, found a supportive, quirky group of people to play with, and managed to reach level 80, the maximum level at the time. (With the most recent expansion, Cataclysm, the max level is now 85). Not only did returning to World of Warcraft allow me engage in the community again, it also gave me a greater foundation for the interviews because I was again able to speak the language of my participants and to share my own gaming stories with them during the interviews.

Unfortunately, shortly after getting to level 80, I started to lose interest in World of Warcraft. As it turns out, I am one of those players who seek the experience of achievement from gaming and reaching the max level took that sense of accomplishment away. Once the XP bar at the bottom of my screen went away, so did my interest in the game. I could no longer visually track my progress as much of the end game content is about gaining reputation instead of experience. Yes, I could create a new character in the same game, but the game play within

World of Warcraft seemed staid and stale after 80 levels and I desired something more complex. So instead of making a new character in that world, I moved to Dungeons and Dragons Online (DDO) and found my MMO home.

Several factors influence my interest in Dungeons and Dragons Online, not the least of which is that I play with friends from my off-line life. Although making new friends through World of Warcraft was often a part of what I enjoyed, playing with people I already know heightened that experience. The camaraderie was deeper and more complex since we already had jokes and stories between us from our time gaming in person. There was also less chance of being “judged” and critiqued by other players that I did not have a previous relationship with. One of the newer features of World of Warcraft, one of the main ones that I needed to go back to playing in order to learn about when I started the research, was the implementation of a “random dungeon finder.” This is a very powerful tool within the game; essentially, a player queues up for their particular role in a group (tank or main combat position, healer, or Damage Per Second [DPS]). The computer system then pairs players from *all* the World of Warcraft servers to play together, matching skills and levels with available dungeons or instances, the places where the highest experience points and gear are usually to be found.

This tool makes leveling a character much easier but it also heightens the level of anonymity within the online culture. Not only are players gaming with people they do not know, they are often not on the same server, so the chance of running into each other again is next to impossible. The online gaming comic, *Penny Arcade*, articulates this phenomenon as The Greater Internet F-wad Theory, which illustrates the equation of a normal person plus anonymity plus an audience equals a jerk (Gabriel “Greater Internet”). In my experience of these random groups, players are much more likely to be highly critical and vocal about how each person plays

her or his character and the critiques are almost always negative. Experiencing these Pick Up Groups (PUGs), and the attitudes from many of the players, was another reason I did not hesitate to leave World of Warcraft. The random groups I have joined in Dungeons and Dragons Online exhibit a higher level of courtesy and respect between players, which is quite possibly related to the fact the DDO has significantly fewer players than WoW. The social experience is key to playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPGs) and experiencing this different community greatly impacted my view of gaming and has become a theme developed throughout this project.

Along with a different population of gamers also came a new gaming style for me. Because I was playing with people who were more likely to be supportive of me learning a new skill set, I started tanking, playing the role of primary melee damage. This shift, from far reaching DPS to head on hand to hand fighting, gave me that same sense of freedom I experienced playing Zork when I was 13 and even if I did mess up and got everyone killed, no one yelled at me or held it against me. Finally, my gaming experience had come full circle and was filled with empowerment.

Women and Gaming

The role of women in the gaming community is a hot topic. A simple Google search produces more than 63 million hits, ranging from organizations dedicated to involving more women in game design to special interest groups devoted to women gamers. Articles discussing women gamers and women in the gaming community date back several years, and many echo the same claims: more women need to be involved in the game industry and recognized as members of gaming communities.

Along with these more positive spins on women in gaming and websites and groups that support women in the gaming community, are the same tired stereotypes; images of women from the games themselves, scantily clad in thong bikinis or push up bustiers. These images produce and reify the idea that a woman's power, in-game or out, comes entirely from her sexuality. Where is the draw for women? What brings them to these games, primarily created by men for male gamers? Many sources indicate that the number of female gamers is growing but few consider why they are drawn to games with violent content and scantily clad female characters.

ELSPA, the Entertainment & Leisure Software Publishers Association, put together a white paper in 2004 discussing trends around women gamers. According to their research, women gamers are the largest growing group of gamers in the world. Women's participation in gaming is evident in statistics from the UK, Korea, the US, Japan, and four other countries, (Krotoski 10). A more detailed discussion of ELSPA's findings can be found in chapters three and five of this dissertation. ELSPA's definition of "gamer" is broadly based, including women who play web based games and cell phone games, whereas many stereotypes of gamers, male or female, tend to revolve back to FPS games.

Originally, I thought this broad definition of "gamer" would fit well with my research and my dissertation project because it would open up an already small subgroup to include more types of gamers. As I began the process for Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, and reviewed the questions I intended to ask my participants, I realized this definition was too broad. Because one of the main concepts I wanted to research revolved around how women gamers created their avatars, I realized my research pool needed to be limited to games that had avatar creation as a mandatory component to game play. The main game type that requires an avatar is RPG, Role Playing Games, and these games also allow for a fair amount of player flexibility

within the game itself, with plot lines that are often dependent on player choice and decision making.

This genre opens itself up well to the kind of study and critique that is central to American and Cultural Studies; bringing personal, lived experience into academic spaces is one of the main thrusts of interdisciplinary programs that seek to combine multiple perspectives from disciplines once considered incongruous. The primary focus of identity study in American and Cultural Studies has been physical locations and how they impact identity development and performance. Central to interdisciplinary studies are investigations of border cultures, regional investigations surrounding the use of language, racial class, and otherwise invisible lines that divide and separate people from the dominant culture. Gloria Anzaldua's *Borderlands: La Frontera*, Chela Sandoval's *Methodology of the Oppressed*, and Omi and Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* are a small handful of the seminal works on race, class, and gender that define American Studies as a discipline. These texts challenge accepted norms and ideologies and investigate the ways in which systems of oppression are accepted and normalized, a key feature of the interdisciplinary work of American Studies scholars.

American Studies as a discipline emerged out of conflict and tension, a thread that continues to exist in many ways in the discipline. Although programs and departments devoted to the study of American cultures began in the 1930's and early 1940's, the mainstreaming of the discipline is linked directly to the conclusion of World War II, which inspired the "study and defense of American values" (Davis 354). Over the years this focus on "American" in American Studies has extended well beyond its original concentration solely on the United States and now includes transnational and international focuses. Tensions arise out of how to create a standardized methodology for American Studies, what kinds of technology and subject matter

should be studied, and how power plays out within these definitions, as well as what kinds of culture should be studied.

In the introduction to a special edition of *American Quarterly*, Siva Vaidhyanathan argues why the study of technology and more specifically the movement to “challenge techno-fundamentalism” is imperative for American Studies scholars. He demonstrates that a “variety of examples of the way scholars of culture are using the study of technology to examine the flows, conflicts, tensions, and hazards of American Culture” (557). The technologies explored within this issue are extensive and varied, ranging from the way science impacts women’s bodies (Sze) to the ways that technology is advertised as a means of individual freedom but is really used to track, monitor, and limit personal movement (Kaplan) to the expression of collective fears about technology in published pulp fiction in the late 19th century (MacDougall). How technology impacts individual lives and how those technologies support and reify power structures are cores of interdisciplinary work. With every technology comes change and Vaidhyanathan calls on the American Studies communities to debunk techno-fundamentalism and make visible the often-unseen impact technology, and its super-fast progress has made on American culture (561).

Because the primary location of my dissertation and its subjects is a virtual landscape, the opportunities for exploring this terrain were almost limitless within cultures that have access to web based computer software and the challenges of this open terrain are discussed in the methodologies chapter. Anything that sets a group apart from the white supremacist, capitalist, patriarch is fair game in cultural and American studies (hooks “Aint I a Woman”). Women gamers, who are fetishized within the gaming community, are prime candidates for an ethnographic interdisciplinary study and because the women in this study will be above the age

of 18, their age alone sets them apart from the groups of female gamers who have traditionally been studied.

Much of the previous academic research on women gamers focuses on girl gamers under the age of 18 and forces distinctions between gender and gaming; almost all the research on women and girl gamers looks at them by separating them by gender, not taking into consideration that gender focused groups, in this case all girls, change the dynamic that is being studied. In perhaps the groundbreaking text discussing gender and gamers, *From Barbie to Mortal Combat: Gender and Computer Games*, the focus is entirely on school aged girls and their attraction to video games. This text, written at the height of the “pink games” movement of the late 1990’s, discusses how and why young girls are attracted to games and gaming, engages women game developers at some of the top toy and game manufacturers, and poses questions regarding how different girls’ interactions are with the games they play. Published in 2000, almost a decade ago, Cassell and Jenkins’s findings set the stage for looking at gender and gaming; however, the question of whether or not to open gaming to girls is a long forgotten sentiment. Women have pushed and prodded their way into gaming communities around the world, forcing not only the gaming industry to take them seriously but the social community as well.

In exploring online communities and MMORPGs, author T. L. Taylor discusses women’s involvement in these communities and the gratification they derive from playing. With a chapter devoted to women gamers in her book, *Play Between Worlds*, she breaks down many of the myths previously held by early gender and games research. Two dominant stereotypes are associated with women who enjoy gaming; first is the idea that women game because they enjoy the social interaction, especially the kind that is found in MMO games where players interact in

real time with other live players. The second is that women are only interested in gaming because their male partners are gamers and they see it as a way to interact with them. These stereotypes suggest that women are immune to the allure of video games and that their motivations for gaming are not a desire to play but rather to use the games to meet a desire to socialize in some “real” life way. It appears that the perceptions of women gamers follow many classic gender stereotypes: women like to talk to each other more than men do and will do everything they can to have a boyfriend.

Taylor’s research showed that while there may be a strong interactive and social component to women’s desire to game, women are often just as competitive and drawn in by their desire to compete not only with other gamers but against their own personally set goals (102). Game mastery and status are other components of game play that draw women gamers into MMOs, as is the escapist desire that is often attributed to male players. And whereas many a woman might have been introduced to gaming by a male in her life, her desire to continue gaming is often tied directly to her own confidence and mastery of the gaming skills. Taylor’s ethnographic work also uncovered that one of the draws for women in gaming, especially gaming in MMOs, is a sense of freedom of movement that women rarely experience in the physical world, as well as the ability to express their own aggression in the game in a way they are often unable to in the physical world (98,109). Throughout Taylor’s text she refers to the gamers she is discussing with great respect, calling them exclusively by their in-game names or by the more general term “women gamers.”

Cassell and Jenkins were discussing females traditionally classified as “girls,” young women under the age of 18 who were involved with computer games, and therefore, their use of the term “girls game movement” and “girl gamer” is easily understood and accepted; however,

using the term “girl gamer” or “gamer girl” to refer to an adult, female, gamer is a bit more complex. Feminism’s Third Wave has allowed “girl” to be used as a term of empowerment, taking back a phrase that was deemed demeaning and limiting during the Second Wave. The re-embracing and redefinition of any term once deemed inappropriate is a complex process because the old definitions never completely melt out of the public consciousness. A poststructuralist reading of the term “girl” would frame it in terms of how its meaning is always shifting and in process. In post-structuralism Saussure’s construct of signifier, signified, and sign becomes a dynamic process that is forever shifting and changing and being modified by the cultural currents of the time (Storey 87, 98). This dynamic view of language, which Derrida refers to as “*differance*,” allows for signifiers to hold multiple meanings simultaneously that relate directly to the power structures inherent in the hierarchies of language (Derrida 25). So “girl” can be read as both the derogatory term that the Second Wave deemed it and as a term of empowerment. Many other words have gone through this kind of transformation, being re-appropriated by the groups that were originally repressed by them. The term “queer” has been reclaimed in a process similar to “girl” – one social movement determined it to be degrading and limiting and a later one found it as a term of empowerment. For further discussion of the use of “Queer” see Judith Butler’s, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*.

Another Google search puts this particular phrase to the test. Whereas the earlier search on “women in gaming” produced websites and organizations engaged in promoting women in the game industry and female game communities, the second hit when searching “girl gamers” pulled up a website called Gorgeous Gamers.com – Rate Hot Girls and Guys. Akin to the infamous “Am I Hot or Not?” web phenomenon, Gorgeous Gamers seeks to pit male and female

gamers in a competition against each other to see who is sexier and more attractive, as if being voted most attractive is just another game to play.

At least the Gorgeous Gamers site is upfront with their intentions; the site is not about gamers, women, girl, or otherwise, creating a community or discussing games and gaming. Its tag line, “Where Gorgeous Gamers Meet,” clearly indicates that the site is intended as a place for attractive people to find and judge other attractive people, with gaming as just an arbitrary connection between them. It is about looks, plain and simple. Other representations of female gamers online are not this cut and dry and the representations and use of the phrase “girl gamers” or “gamer girls” becomes just that much more complicated. Many of the self-identified and created spaces representing women gamers online embrace the term “gamer girls” or “girl gamers.” These sites created as a means of building and maintaining gaming communities are in direct contrast to a site like Gorgeous Gamers. The women who design and manage sites such as GirlGamer.com and GameGirl.com have little difficulty reconciling the dynamic nature and multiple meanings behind the word “girl;” like “Queer,” perhaps the key to understanding when and how these terms work links back directly to whether it is a self-referential word or a name someone is called. As Butler discusses, when someone is called a name they are placed within the discourse that created that name and its meaning, which is in direct opposition to when an individual refers to herself (122). Perhaps it is a marker of growing up in the Third Wave, or perhaps it is simply that as everyday life has become a greater and greater mix of technology and representation, young women are better suited to understand and accept dynamic signifiers. This acceptance and understanding of the ambiguity of language, while capitalizing on its power, bleeds directly into their visual representations in these spaces.

Performance of a sexual identity is common for many female gamers who participate

online and represent themselves in various online communities. There are many cross representations by the same players in different forums, where the focus remains only partially on actual gaming. The early versions of the Miss Video Game website shows exactly how these sites cross-pollinate each other and how the representations multifaceted. Articles written about girl gamers feature pictures with stacks of games held between their legs, or in swimsuits or underwear. Often there are naked girl gamer images with strategically placed game controllers and game consoles. The rules and power associated with a successful sexual identity are clear to these gamers and they engage willingly in this representation. In a viral internet video that took Twitter by storm in September 2010, the “Geek and Gamer Girls Song” had over one million views in its first week alone (Team Unicorn – wikipedia). A spoof of Katy Perry’s hit song, “California Girls,” the Team Unicorn (because women gamers are like unicorns, they do not exist) production highlighted female interest in hobbies often associated with male gamers and comic book enthusiasts. As a means of celebrating female engagement in these traditionally male pastimes, the playful nature of the video is fantastic but it still relies heavily on the sexual appeal of the women and features each Unicorn naked with various forms of geeky media covering her genitalia.

These images mark girl gamer identities as directly related to sexuality. The players who represent themselves on gamer websites and in these kinds of viral videos know how to get attention and since it is a voluntary activity, something they must seek out and participate in on their own time, they must derive a certain amount of pleasure and affirmation from this performance. In an article discussing the importance of studying technology to American Studies scholars, Carolyn de la Pena says scholars must examine how technology provides “sites of production and consumption whose meanings are multilayered and often contradictory” (938).

Women gamers want to be respected as gamers and seen as attractive simultaneously, creating a multilayered, complex, and contradictory identity. One of the themes that emerged from the Miss Video Game website was the most common answer to the profile question, “How would you like to change the perception of girl gamers?” Many of the participants insisted that girls could be attractive *and* effective gamers at the same time. These players derive pleasure from the production of their online identity and the power that it provides them. The online profiles and websites I have viewed left me unclear as to whether these performances are intended to be fully online, cyber-world only performances or are intended to lead to sexual encounters in the physical world.

In the past many academics that study online culture have made a distinction between Real Life (RL) and Virtual Reality (VR) as a means of marking online versus “real” life experiences (Turkle, 1995; Bell, 2001; Nakamura, 2002). These definitions are limiting and deny the power, influence, and impact that cyber-life and cyber-representations have on individual identity. In order to more fairly and accurately represent the importance of cyber-lifestyles, my research makes the distinction between the *cyber-world* and the *physical* one. I use these terms interchangeably with *online* and *offline* life. This terminology is used throughout this project and marks a significant challenge to how identity is viewed in online and offline, and cyber and physical, lives.

Performance Theory

The rewards for effective and socially accepted performance in media-enhanced societies are great and far-reaching; being able to perform class, gender, or race are all abilities that can bring success and power, even when obviously contrary to physical realities. Judith Butler, in

Gender Trouble, discusses how it is during a drag show that the performance of gender can most clearly be witnessed:

The performance of drag plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed. But we are actually in the presence of three contingent dimensions of significant corporality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance. If the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance. (187)

During a drag show, the audience is aware that the performers are “putting on a show;” it is disclosed to them beforehand that the physical sex of the performer differs from the gender being performed. They willingly accept and understand the performance and the significance of the disconnection between the physical and the performed identities. This is part of the allure of drag performances, seeing gender performed in an outrageous manner. Women readily accept this construction of gender because feminine gender performance is naturalized through social construction. The process of putting on make-up and playing “dress up” is taught to little girls and even though it may be acceptable for young boys to play like this, the social construction of masculine gender demands more rugged and aggressive forms of performance. Through this quote, Butler is calling attention to the multifaceted process that is gender performance and the complex series of interactions that go on while constructing gender in any landscape, be it virtual, or physical.

Although the kind of performance online is different from that of a drag show, gender performance is a part of daily life and a process that is continually evolving. Butler builds off the work of philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, who believed that beings were constantly in a state of becoming and overturning established identities (Deleuze, 1987). Performance of race, gender, or class is a process of becoming but can never be because it is not a fixed identity; instead, it is a continually morphing process that relates directly to the post-modern concept of identity. The fragmentation of post-modern identity allows individuals to construct an identity built on successful performances, and the flexibility afforded in cyberspace allows that fragmentation to develop even further. In any kind of identity performance there are rules to be followed and adhered to and there are distinct advantages and disadvantages to breaking those rules. Most people are uncomfortable when they are unable to figure out someone's gender, especially when the dichotomy of female/male is challenged.

Rules are learned and reinforced, and those behaviors that are appropriate bring success to the performer. Those that are inappropriate bring recriminations and punishment. Drag shows often call attention to these constructions, where the performers will acknowledge that the audience is looking for the point at which the performance is compromised. I recently attended a drag show in downtown Portland, and Darcelle (the owner and top billed performer at this club) remarked that one of the women in the front row was looking for her "balls." Drag queens acknowledge not only the performance of gender but the power they are afforded by the identities they take on throughout the show. They play upon gender as a form of social control, where the external power structure Foucault would call the panopticon is internalized as a self-invested process (Foucault, 1975). This self-monitoring supports hegemonic systems and fools people into believing that they are "free" to be whomever they choose to be when in reality the

choices they make are severely limited. These power structures are normalized and internalized, and are made invisible to the people they most affect, which gives them their greatest amount of power. Because most people do not acknowledge the performance, they are in acted on in terms of commodity fetishism, where value is placed on valueless objects (Marx 436).

In Maura Wickstrom's book, *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and Its Theatrical Seductions*, her critique of performance relates directly back to consumerism, to the choices people make as to where to spend their money and time and how that performance is controlled and manipulation by corporate brandscapes. Of the brandscapes she discusses, The American Girl doll collection is the most fully developed and thought out. Wickstrom discusses the success of this upscale line of dolls and clothing for girls, describing its evolution at the hands of the designer, Pleasant Rowland. Rowland's story details how she was inspired one Christmas when she was trying to buy dolls for the girls in her family and was left wanting by the two categories of dolls she found, which she referred to as the "teen queen" or the "mommy" (Wickstrom 97). Rowland decided girls and parents needed more choice, and she would be the one to provide that choice. Taking the idea of creating in doll form a historical experience like one she had visiting Colonial Williamsburg, Rowland set out to create and market a set of dolls that would come with individual books and stories, accessories, and other peripheral items that could immerse young girls, eight to twelve, in what specific periods American history were like for young women.

The young women, or girls with a small "g" as Wickstrom points out, learn the proper ways to behave and act as they engage with Felicity, the first American Girl, whose story takes place in Williamsburg. Through videos associated with the brandscape shown at the Williamsburg site, girls learn such important behaviors as how to properly make and drink tea,

and are given “gentle, corrective tips” by Miss Manderly, who is a living, costumed recreation of a character in the storybook who taught Felicity the same feminine skills. These learned, enacted, and embodied gender roles are linked directly to national narratives and heterosexist ideals of womanhood. Girls are taught from a young age to play with dolls and act out or perform the motherly duties that they are expected to capitalize on later in life. They are taught from this play acting that they will always be in that Deleuzian state of becoming women and must play the part as successfully as they can in order to be successful women.

As Wickstrom argues, American girls who buy American Girl dolls can never become Girls – they are, by the company’s design, always removed from that identity – which pushes them to continue reaching for an ideal they can never achieve and spending money in order to try. The same is true for individuals who are always in process of becoming Women or Men but will never achieve that goal. There is always another level of performance that can be sought after if not achieved and, according to Wickstrom, money to be spent in the pursuit of that unattainable goal.

Effective performances are not only about reaching unattainable goals. Often individuals chose to change, play, perform, and enact gender as a means of self-empowerment. In her discussion of gender performance by butch/femme lesbians at a formal dance called “Prom Night,” Kath Weston tests the boundaries of performance theory and explores some of the vacancies left by many who focus gender performance solely on visual appearance. She, like Butler, calls attention to the difference between biological gender and performed gender:

Like the worker under capitalism who is formally free to sell her labor (or free to die for lack of the wages to buy food and shelter), practitioners of this kind of butch/femme are apparently free to present gendered representations of self that

they assemble, according to personal taste, from repertoires of commodities. With ties and tunics, heels and haircuts, they freeze and then fragment gender so that it appears not as the product of an oppressive power relation (Man over Woman), but as a cultural resource that can empower without oppressing – a resource utilizable by all, regardless of anatomical differences. (74)

Weston's post-modern stance here is clear; she takes the physical realities of gender (clothing and commodities) and talks about people "fragmenting" them, picking and choosing pieces to use in order to create an idealized gendered self, regardless of its relation to one's physical body. This reflects many of the ideas the women gamers I interviewed discussed as to how they reconcile gendered representations in-game with their out of game identities. This fragmentation is empowering, breaking down the binaries of gender, and turning accepted social norms into tools of power and discourse.

Unlike Wickstrom's focus on corporate brandscapes, Weston's critiques the placement gender and gender performance solely within a material world. In her critique of performance theory, she states that focusing on the material gendering "fetishizes gender by relocating gender in the hair, beads, muscles . . . even the stories people draw on to call gender into being through performance. What this tendency to perceive gender as the property of possession – or as a product of the significance culturally attributed to possessions – obscures is gender's character as an aspect of social relations" (77). Weston's critique draws attention to the fact that turning gender into a commodity fetish essentially removes the most important component of gender: its social power. Focusing how on gender is physically manifested in clothing and other commodities detracts from the power that gender has socially. Playing digital Role Playing

Games brings this power to the forefront; as this dissertation will discuss, gender performances online are complex and female performances carry a great deal of social power.

And So it Begins

How this power relates to the presentation of identity online is the driving force behind each chapter of this dissertation. Because “girl gamers,” gorgeous or not, are still considered rare, regardless of consistent evidence to the contrary, women gamers gain a fair amount of recognition and attention through the social power of gender. American Studies has a long-standing tradition of exploring the ways that power and power structures inflict themselves on people and how they resist those structures. This avenue of research opened up the possibility to explore both how representations of “gamer girls” fight and support the ideological structures that still oppress women and how they in turn attempt to subvert those structures.

Weston’s work addresses gender and gender performance in what might be called “safe” spaces; the investigation of “Prom Night” to observe the fragmentation and power provided to individuals who are able to choose how and why they want to perform gender opens up the consideration of gender as a social power and connects it to the fragmentation and de-centering of postmodern identity. These are valuable observations and fill a gap left in performance theory. Moving these ideas from “Prom Night” into the cyber-world is a big leap. The means of representation online are significantly different from representations offline, although there is a great amount of overlap.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, as I began the process towards IRB approval, I noticed that one of my key research questions focused on how women gamers create their avatars, the choices and decisions they make at the beginning of the game. This forced me to

reconsider a wider definition of “gamer” and to limit the participants to female gamers who play Role Play Games because almost all RPGs involve creating an avatar. Although some rhythm games, like Rock Band, also involve this process, the use and performance in that game genre varies greatly. Limiting to both console RPG (individual player games like Dragon Age: Origins) and MMORPGs (played online with other people) maintained consistency and validity in the interview responses. The methods chapter, titled “Just Tweet It: Using online social media to recruit and conduct ethnographic research,” discusses the journey I took as a novice researcher and the evolution of my interview strategies.

One of the main questions within the avatar creation thread was whether or not female players would play male avatars. It is widely known and accepted in gamer communities, both online and offline, that male players will adopt female personas in-game. This is a long-standing tradition in many pen and paper role playing games like Dungeons and Dragons. The idea of experimenting with gender performance is accepted in a way it is not outside of many game cultures. This caused me to question if female players also explored “Other” gendered performances in-game. The third chapter of this dissertation discusses this phenomenon that I call “Cyber Drag,” and explores in detail how women look at their avatars in-game. Reconciling the hyper-sexuality often associated with female avatars was not as much of an issue for most of the women I talked to throughout the study; in fact, most embraced the female images, conscious of that creation as an idealized self. This concept was completely foreign to me when I began gaming and instead was discovered when someone saw my avatar and pointed out that it looked a lot like me (same haircut and color, similar color eyes). This self-awareness led to the next major insight and theme that emerged from the research interviews.

Although much of the previous research and the popular mindset about gamers recognizes that gamers are likely to see themselves as the characters they play, I found two subsets of gamers that did not share in that self-identification process. Chapter four discusses three distinct groups of gamers I found: Self Gamers, Role Players, and Neutral Gamers and subsets of Self/Role Players, Self/Neutral Players, and Role Play/Neutrals. Each main group has different motivations to play digital role playing games, and those motivations greatly impact things like how they create their avatars, who they play with online (friend vs. strangers), and what they do within the confines of the game universe. These groups emerged throughout the interviews, and it was only in looking back over the transcripts after the fact that I saw the patterns emerge. One of the strengths of my research method was the fact that I was not looking to fill certain ideas or expectations but rather was open to the idea that the themes would emerge on their own. This was one of the most satisfying parts of the research, allowing it to progress naturally. It was also one of the most demanding because it required me to open up to the possibility that women gamers were not all like me.

The closing chapter of this dissertation bears a lot of responsibility. Because I wrote each chapter as a distinct and unique piece of my research, I had to discover a common thread that would tie them all together. Again, the answer emerged out of the research interviews, instead of any preconceived notions that I had about the research itself. The opening questions for the interviews (Appendix B) were: How do you define a gamer? and What does it mean to be a gamer? One of the most impressive, and totally unexpectedly, consistent responses was a desire to participate in game culture. For the majority of participants, being a “gamer” meant something more than simply playing games as your favorite hobby. Participating in gaming culture was a key component in many of the responses; reading game comics or novels based on

game stories, watching *The Guild* or *The Legend of Neil* (both webseries based around themes of gaming culture), and participating in conventions or game groups were among the most common replies. From these responses emerged the idea of the closing chapter: gaming is no longer a subculture. It is an ambitious idea but one that calls forth all the main themes and ideas from the chapters.

The culture around gaming emerged into mainstream culture almost 30 years ago when the technology available in mass production offered little more than arcade games consisting of two “paddles” players controlled with handheld joysticks. Although Pong marked the beginning of gaming, one that quickly moved up to the Commodore Vic20 my family owned and even the Apple IIe I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it has persisted as a popular medium of entertainment and self-expression. It now marks an entire generation to the degree that “retro games” and “retro arcades” are places where gamers can go to play the same games, perhaps on the same machines as they did when they were younger. And although not everyone can answer the question, “What is your favorite video game?” gaming is still important and valuable to many people.

Each chapter of this dissertation also incorporates scenes and observations from the webseries, *The Guild*. As I started researching this dissertation, the first two seasons of *The Guild* were already available to watch free online and through Netflix instant. (The DVDs were available for purchase, as well as individual episodes and seasons through iTunes.) It is not an accident that every chapter of this dissertation discusses a scene from the show; as I was writing, *The Guild* became my touchstone. When I was struggling to contextualize the themes emerging from the interviews, I would watch an episode or two and remember that I was not alone in seeing these ideas in the research. So many moments from *The Guild* reflected my own process,

and shed light on the same ideas I was discussing, it was almost unnatural. I included the scenes from the show to balance out the feedback and stories from the participants. One of the reasons *The Guild* has persisted as a series, and has over 100 million viewers online, is because so many fans see reflections of themselves and their own gaming in it, to such an extent that the fans funded the completion of the first season and continue to support the show by buying the DVDs even though the show is available for free online. Even people who are not gamers can still watch the show and recognize it as a zeitgeist for the era of online computer gaming, the era of the nerd. This is true for the gamers I talked to and those I have yet to interview, because this research project has not yet reached its end game.

CHAPTER TWO

Just Tweet It: Using social media to recruit and conduct ethnographic research or how 140 characters changed my life

As season three of the web-series *The Guild* opens Cyd, or Codex as she is known in-game, is promoted to guild leader. Reluctantly placed into a position of leadership within the digital role playing game of the series (loosely based on World of Warcraft), her first hurdle as guild leader is replacing a member who has quit. She posts an open call for video applications from new players wishing to join her guild, The Knights of Good. In these videos the audience sees a plethora of humanity – some who seem reasonably sane, if quirky, some who like to actively role play – going so far as to wear costumes during the video interviews, and some who are so insanely engaged with their gaming they have developed dual personalities. It is understandable that Codex is overwhelmed with her choices. She is not used to being in any kind of leadership role, let alone the guild leader who is responsible for making decisions about the future of this group, and the range of applicants leaves her at a loss for how to proceed.

Even though doing ethnographic research for my doctoral dissertation was my own decision, I understand Codex’s feelings of being overwhelmed at the process of conducting internet research. With a single Tweet from *The Guild*’s Twitter feed, I was instantly overwhelmed with email responses from women who wanted to participate in my dissertation research (See Fig. 1). Codex’s experience recruiting a new guild member makes an excellent parallel to my own journey into online ethnographic research, and the many lessons I would learn through the process.



Fig. 1. The Tweet that changed my life.

My academic background is in English and Literature studies. My BA from UC Santa Cruz focused on early 20th century American authors, an interest I continued to pursue into my Master's degree. When I decided to go back for the Ph.D. I knew I wanted to do a different kind of research; at that point I had spent much time interacting with texts, looking at books, and publications that were written by authors many years ago. I spent time in the New York Public Library when I was working on my Master's, immersing myself into more and more of William Faulkner's work and the surrounding writing and criticism. I loved it but I knew I had grown past that type of research. I wanted to engage with people now and not just texts.

From this realization I decided instead of continuing into another English program, I would open my options up to an American Studies program, where I knew the interdisciplinary nature of the program would allow me to do research beyond textual analysis but would also play to my established strengths. It was an exciting time for me when I decided to focus on female gamers for my research subject pool, and female digital role playing game (RPG) players to be specific. I am a gamer myself, having used gaming as a centerpiece of my identity since early childhood. *The Guild* was partially responsible for this direction in my research since I knew the writer and star of the series, Felicia Day, was also a gamer and that the show's popularity rested with many women gamers who saw themselves in Day's characterization of Codex.

From the literature already written, I knew that there had been a few studies that focused on women gamers, most notably T. L. Taylor's work, "Play Between Worlds," which discussed women who played EverQuest, one of the original MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game). But I also knew games and gaming culture had come a long way and so had women gamers. ELSPA (Electronic and Leisure Software Producers Association) produced a white paper that had informed Taylor's research, describing women gamers as the largest growing population of gamers (Taylor, 2006), and although the numbers alone were exciting, their study had a very broad definition of gaming and did not engage the idea of identity in relation to gaming. My dissertation started to take shape; I would look at how identity formation

engaged with gaming subcultures, specifically those subcultures invested in digital role playing games.

Shortly after getting permission to proceed with my research from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I started thinking about how to go about finding women to talk to about gaming and what it means to be a gamer. I remembered that Felicia Day not only stars in and writes *The Guild*, but is also a gamer; perhaps she would be interested in an interview. With nothing to lose I decided to send her an email and see if she might have the time to be interviewed for my study. The worst she could say was no and I would have to find another place to start my research.

She did say no, or at least her publicist did. She was in the middle of writing season three of the show, and preparing to film it as well and had too much on her plate. But her publicist offered to Tweet my website because he knew a large part of *The Guild's* forty thousand followers were female. I had enough foresight to set up a separate email inbox before I told him to go ahead and Tweet it for me – and it was a good thing I did. Within 20 minutes of the short message shown above, I had 40 emails. I went to teach class, excited that I already had so many participants ready to be interviewed, and completely unaware that by the time I got out of class, I would have over 80. Within 24 hours I had 120 requests for interviews. One of the things I had not anticipated was the viral nature of Twitter; *The Guild* made the initial post, but it was quickly re-Tweeted by many of its followers, some with hefty networks of their own allowing my site massive exposure in a matter of moments. To say it was overwhelming is an understatement – having never done this kind of research before, but having several mentors and classmates from other disciplines who had direct experience, I knew that finding research participants was often difficult, perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of ethnographic research. Most people struggle to meet their minimum criteria, often set right around 30 participants, using the “snowball” method of talking to one participant and then connecting to other potential subjects through the first. And here I had 120 email requests to go through! I was thankful, recognizing my good fortune, and utterly overwhelmed at the task that lay before me as a brand new

ethnographic researcher.

I realized too late that although I made sure to note that participants needed to be over the age of 18, I also needed to include in my announcement certain pieces of information I had not considered beforehand (like what games do you play, and where, and in what time zone are you located.) I had mentioned in my initial post (Figure 2) that I was looking for gamers in and around the Portland, OR area, but an overwhelming number of emails came in from all over the country and many from outside of the US. I had decisions to make at that point: which gamers to include in the study, how to limit the numbers, and how to include as many people as possible.

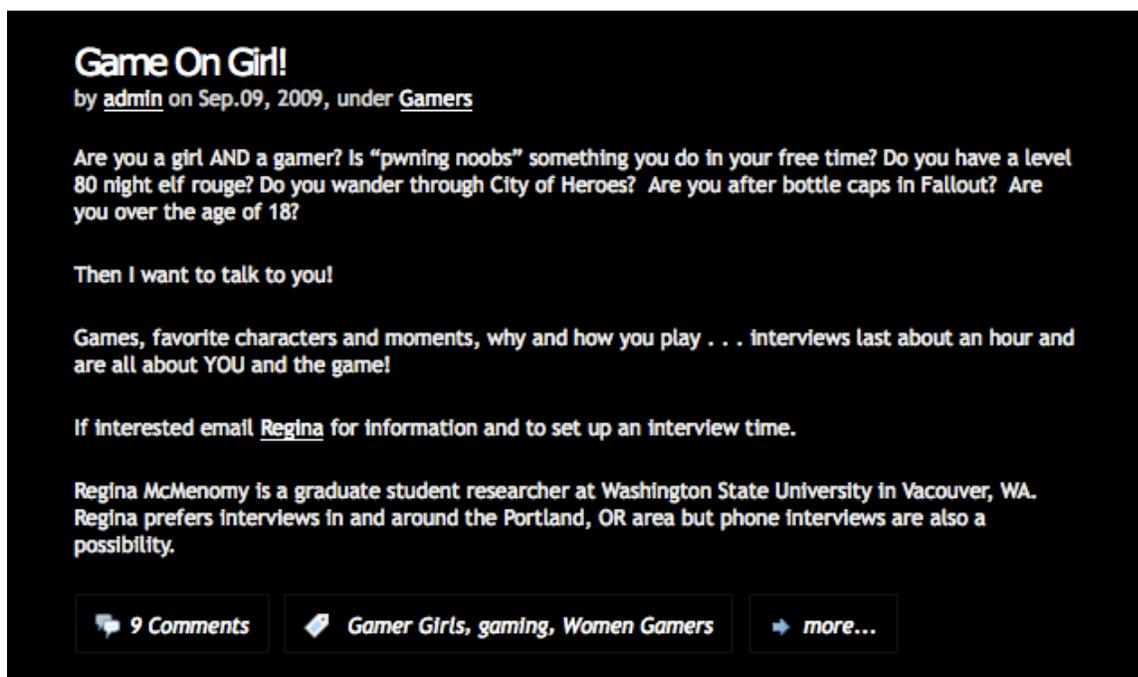


Fig. 2. My initial call for interviewees. From www.game-on-girl.com.

Many of the answers to these questions evolved organically, from reading through the first emails and seeing what I already knew from the participant's self-disclosure, and then deciding what it was I wanted in my sample pool. Similar to the videos submitted to Codex, the emails from potential participants discussed at length their own dedication to gaming, what other gaming activities they had done (gaming conferences, blogs, games they had played and

mastered, etc) and that volunteered information gave me a place to begin to narrow down my pool.

Evolution of the Interview Mode

My dissertation committee provided me with some formal training in qualitative research methodology. It was long assumed in my program that students would follow in the footsteps of the faculty in residence who focused most of their work on textual analysis. There were faculty who studied video games, and movies, and other forms of media and culture, but only recently had the students moved into a place where they wanted to do different kinds of individual research that involved human subjects. The process of applying for an IRB approved protocol was something new in my program, and something that few people could advise me about. Knowing this history as I started my research, I surrounded myself with faculty members who had done qualitative research and developed my plan based on their advice and experience. I read articles and handbooks on research approaches and between that, the IRB ethics training, and several conversations with my committee members, I think I knew just enough to be a safe and ethical researcher, but not a particularly efficient one. I understood that my research questions would change as I worked on the interviews, and that they were intended to keep with the spirit of the question, but there was no real way to test the interview protocol I spent months developing until I actually started conducting interviews.

The first major implementation question I faced was how to access this gigantic population that had fallen at my feet. One hundred and twenty interview requests from all over the world. My digital recorder, which I had intended to use for in person interviews, would not allow me to interview participants on the other side of the country. But it seemed silly to limit myself to this traditional method of face to face interviews when I had so many women wanting to participate, and – I gathered from reading only the first handful of responses – such a diverse population in terms of age and experience gaming. I decided to use Skype to conduct the interviews and to record them directly onto my computer's hard drive. The service is free as

long as you are chatting computer to computer (there is a small monthly fee for computer to phone interviews, which I gladly subscribed to for women who were unable to chat with me online but had access to a telephone).

The vast majority of my potential participants were quite comfortable with these kinds of interviews; many online gamers use a program called Ventrillo (“Vent” for short) that allows them to talk to other players while they game. So they were not only comfortable talking about gaming over the computer, most of them already had headsets with microphones. This made setting up the interviews significantly easier than it might have been with a different kind of population. Because the group I was interviewing was already used to this communication mode, the organization of the interviews came together quite seamlessly.

Of course, given my lack of experience with interview based research, I did not realize how extensive the transcription process was going to be. I had previously done a small amount of transcription work for another scholar, taking one of his lectures and transcribing it for him. I had an idea of the process but not of the amount of lag time it would cause for me to be able to schedule the interviews I needed for the study while the leads were still “hot.” Internet culture demands quick response time, and I worried that my almost year long process to complete the interviews would cause many of the potential interviewees to lose interest in the study. Thankfully, I had enough participants that even when I did not receive responses to all my replies for interviews, I had plenty more to choose from and in the end I left about 50 emails unanswered. As might be expected, sifting through 120 emails was no small task. After I completed the first set of interviews, I started going through the emails requests more carefully, looking for participants that might be different from those I had already interviewed. My main concerns with the first group of interviewees was that the majority played the same game (World of Warcraft) and the age range was 21 to 43.

I also knew early on that I would not be able to interview all the women who contacted me. My feminist ideology wants every story of every potential interview to be told so that as many voices can be heard as possible. As I read through more and more of the emails I had

received, it became clear that I would need to adapt the interview modes to accommodate different types of groups, including women who did not have the ability, mostly due to schedule constraints, to spend an hour talking to me voice to voice. In order to meet the needs of these different populations, I went back to the IRB and amended my research approvals to include interviews via email (where I would email the questions to the interviewee) and Instant Messaging interviews (where we would use more traditional text chat formats to talk).

After the first few email interviews, I decided that I was not particularly fond of this format. Several of the participants did an excellent job of answering the questions, one writing more than 20 pages single spaced for her responses. But most did not engage the material the same way that the voice to voice interviewees did. I was not able to follow up with questions or have them elaborate on their answers at the moment they were answering them. Although my protocol for the interviews allowed for follow up questions, these initial text interviews via email did not inspire much further conversation. There was something missing in the process, something that the email interview process was not capturing.

So I returned to conducting voice to voice interviews, falling again into the place where the traditional ideas about ethnography ruled and where many interviewers believed there could be no substitute. Until one day when I scheduled what I thought was another voice to voice interview. I opened up Skype, and sent the first IM message to the interviewee. She responded immediately. I initiated a call and she did not answer. She responded back to me that she thought it was going to be an IM interview, had no microphone, and was sitting at a public computer. She thought the interview would be text based, as opposed to voice to voice. At that moment, I decided to try it and to see what the process would be like. My bias was already in place against this process, imagining that the voice to voice interviews would still be the strongest because they had already demonstrated the most value in my experience and they are so widely accepted as part of the norm for ethnographic or interview research.

I was pleasantly surprised with the interview. She was attentive and engaged, and very eloquent. I could still probe her for further questions and see exactly what it was that I wanted to

get more information about as we chatted. It should not have come as a surprise to me, but after that interview and then trying a few more IM interviews, I found that I was a stronger interviewer with the text interviews. After years of textual analysis, my close reading skills are superb. I was able to pick up on subtle clues and address the questions I was asking with more detail than I was in the voice to voice interviews. As other researchers have already noted (Miller, 1995), the note taking process can be distracting for both the researcher and the participant. I think my tendency to write down specific details of what they said, rather than focus on the meaning and significance of what they were saying, ended up being a hindrance to my voice to voice interview abilities. I worried too much that my notes might be inaccurate, rather than leaving that for the transcription process. At this point, I had already conducted the bulk of the interviews for the study. Between the voice to voice and email interviews, I had completed roughly 20 interviews at that time. My committee had suggested I interview a minimum of 25 participants, and since the transcription process was streamlined with the IM interviews, I decided to round the number up to 30, giving me more opportunity to represent some of the more extraordinary requests that I had come across toward the end of the 120 emails. In the end I conducted 15 voice to voice interviews, 12 via instant messaging services, and four over email.

Going Against the Grain

The qualitative research community has kept its focus primarily on traditional methods of ethnography, especially in terms of interview modes. Face to face interviews are widely believed to give the best kind of researchable data and to allow the researcher to take in the most information about their research subject. This philosophy makes sense; countless types of information are gathered from face to face contact including non-verbal signals and other socio-economic markers such as clothing, and home and community surroundings. At the same time, this removal of physical location and visual markers that often attach to stereotypes is also a strength. Rather than worry about fitting into the visual or social expectations I might have

about them, these clues were removed for my participants. This allowed more freedom to be themselves and to focus on the discussion at hand, since they also did not have to worry about their appearance as well. Throughout this section, I will discuss the pitfalls and pleasures that my alternative methodology produced and the long standing ethnographic traditions and biases already in place.

In the last few years, qualitative researchers have been expanding the methods they use to collect data and discussing those processes at length in journals and textbooks. There is a trend among these writings that anything out of the “ordinary” must be rationalized and measured against the data collected in traditional methods of observation and data collection (e.g. face to face interviews). Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) compare interview modes, having conducted both phone and in person interviews with the same population. They conclude that there is very little difference between the results they gathered, citing the kind of answers given and the length of the transcripts as proof. It is even suggested that with some populations, especially those who might be uncomfortable with an in-person interview, telephone interviews might solicit more complete answers from the interviewees (114). Midanik and Greenfield reaffirm this belief and the possibility that phone interviews allow the respondents a greater sense of anonymity, something that could be of great benefit to the researcher, especially if researching sensitive topics or groups who might be difficult to reach otherwise. In the case of their research, they were talking to alcohol dependent populations and the participants showed less hesitation discussing their disease in telephone interviews (212). Amanda Holt, in a research note for *Qualitative Research*, discusses using telephone interviews out of necessity, having been unable to access the populations needed for her study in person (Holt, 2010). Even though she modified her original interview mode from face to face interviews because she had difficulty reaching her population otherwise, she discusses how those populations were better served by this format. Participants were better able to manage their time and their physical space, allowing flexibility with scheduling and their physical space that would not have existed if she was doing in person interviews (116-117). Holt’s experience very much reflects my own; because of the tweet from

The Guild, I had a wide range of potential participants, only a handful of which were local to me. By using Skype to conduct the interviews, I was able to get a much more varied snapshot of women gamers than I would have gotten sticking to traditional face to face interviews.

Using the internet to conduct ethnographic research is not a new trend; since the first Multi User Domain or Dungeon (MUDs), researchers have been looking at and exploring how identity is formed in online environments and treating these digital mediums as places to perform ethnographic study. The first views of online ethnography were similar to the celebratory ideals around the internet in general, many opinions forming along the dichotomy of celebratory or cynical ideals (Bell, 2002). Thankfully, these ideals have been complicated in recent years, with most scholars now acknowledging that the internet is a place of contested identities, and that many of the stereotypes and stigmas associated with race, class, and gender map onto individual experiences in online spaces (Bell, 2002; Nakamura, 2002 & 2007).

In *The Sage Handbook for Qualitative Research*, Annette Markham discusses the complex process of conducting online ethnography. She shares her experiences conducting research with populations that were unknown to her and where she had no prior awareness of their offline identities. Markham warns that key issues for researchers to consider with online ethnographic research are the same as those associated with telephone interviews: being unable to assess non-verbal clues and the researcher's tendency to make assumptions about their interview subjects that may or may not be correct (805). Out of this process, Markham urges researchers to be even more diligent in terms of how they conduct research online; because many of the limitations that might hinder ethnographic research can be removed through the internet, the need for protecting research subjects and accurately representing them becomes even more important. Referencing Stephen Carter's work, she says it is important that researchers remember "what it means to have integrity. It involves not only discerning what is right and what is wrong, but also acting on these discernments, even at personal cost, and publicly acknowledging and defending one's stance and choices" (815). Markham also suggests that the biases in qualitative research that emphasize physically embodied research need to be

reconfigured and new epistemological frameworks need to be created in order to better understand and explore the ways new technologies impact ethnography (815). The research modes I used in this study suggest that good quality data can be obtained from methods that have previously been thought less effective and that these methods should be considered highly worthwhile. Thankfully, trends in qualitative research clearly indicate that alternative methods are slowly being accepted and researchers will have even more methods of collecting data open to them in the future.

Another angle in qualitative research that is important to this dissertation is autoethnography; as is true with alternative methods of research, being a member of the group you are interviewing can be a blessing and a curse. In a recent article for *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, Leon Anderson undertakes the daunting task of defining and challenging other researchers to consider how they are conducting what he calls *analytic* autoethnography. He gives a brief history of autoethnography, detailing the traditions surrounding the old and the new Chicago school, briefly reviewing almost 50 years' worth of traditions. His greatest critique of many autoethnographers is their need and desire to remove themselves from their texts, arguing that the resulting lack of self-reflection and narrative are a distinct disadvantage to their writing (375-6). From this position he sets up three criteria for researchers to use as a guide to engaging in analytic autoethnography:

. . . researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting, (2) visible as such a member in the research's published texts, and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena. (375)

Anderson details the myriad reasons why each of these is important throughout the article, not the least of which are an understanding of the community being studied, a common language, and a certain amount of empathy afforded to the researchers by their role within the community they are researching. Citing trends in "evocative" autoethnography (which is based on the researcher's emotional engagement with the subject) as being the opposite of analytic, Anderson

creates yet another academic dichotomy, saying that the only effective use of autoethnography is if the researchers speak with other members in order to reaffirm their own experiences (382). I agree with many of Anderson's observations, because I do believe critical engagement and theoretical grounding of any kind of ethnographic work is important. Narratives are most effective and engaging when they have theoretical underpinnings, explanations as to why they are important rather than the author simply sharing their own experience as proof. However, I bristle at the thought of creating another dichotomy; from my experience with this research I think it is possible to be both evocative (which in Anderson's definition means emotionally engaged) and analytical. For my own research purposes, it was necessary to speak with other women gamers but it seems unreasonable to assume that it is mandatory to do so in order to conduct autoethnographic research.

Specific parts of my research were significantly easier to manage because I am a member of the group I am researching; more than once I had a participant say, "You know what a guild is, right?" or "If I use game terms, you'll get it?" This membership and common language allowed the participants to just flow through their own narratives and not have to stop and define terms as they went. Granted, sometimes they did use terms I did not know and would later have to research but that only added to my own depth of understanding of games, gaming, and game culture, which is one of the greatest pleasures that I experienced through this research. Another hitch, as I will discuss in greater depth later in this chapter, was my own desire to share my gaming stories of frustration and triumph, which were not always welcomed by the participants. It seems every avenue of ethnographic (auto or evocative or both) and qualitative research is a fine line that the researcher, and her participants, must consider throughout the journey.

Considerations and Challenges

Conducting ethnographic research online, instead of in face to face situations, removes many of the traditional ways that researchers would verify certain aspects associated with their respondents' identities and non-verbal clues (Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004; Stephens, 2007; Holt,

2010). For example, I had no way to verify my participants' age other than to take their word for it. Even with the request in my call for participants that everyone be over the age of 18, I still did Google and Facebook searches on all of my participants in order to verify their identities. The vast majority of participants emailed me from accounts associated with their full names so this part of the verification was rather straightforward and many of them had photos associated with their Skype or IM accounts so I could also use those as a guideline. One of the most significant areas where I was left lacking information was in regards to the race or ethnicity of my participants. I was only able to discover these attributes if they were disclosed during the interview, something many of them did not acknowledge. This, unfortunately, leaves this part of my analysis somewhat lacking. The vast majority of pictures associated with Skype and Facebook accounts tell me that most of my participants are white, other than the few who declared themselves otherwise. This is something that I will take into account upon further research. Since I believed I was going to be doing the interviews face to face, I thought I would be able to visually identify race and class markers but since I could not see any of the participants in any of my interview modes, and did not include asking them in my protocol, I am left with some unanswered questions. This is an avenue I would like to explore as I continue my research beyond the writing of the dissertation.

Encouraging the participants to talk or tell their own stories was never difficult; all of the women I talked to had stories of what it was like to be a woman gamer, and to be part of a subculture that was not stereotypically associated with their gender. Many had stories of "getting hit on" or other nuisances that had presented themselves in-game. Often, we would wander down paths where they would talk about their greatest successes and how meaningful it was to them to be a gamer, or how the skills they learned in games translated so well into their physical world careers. Often they would answer questions before I asked them, most notably saying that they avoided playing male avatars without prompting (one of the lines of inquiry I was pursuing and the main topic of discussion in a later chapter). It was often part of the process for them to offer example stories without prompting, adding depth to their responses.

That is perhaps one of the biggest changes that developed in the way I asked the questions. The more open ended the questions the more I was able, as a researcher, to step out of the way and allow them to wander as they would. For example, one of my original questions was worded like this: “Have you ever had an experience when you’re gaming online where someone finds out you’re really a female player? What kinds of reactions did you face and can you tell me about it?” Within the first few interviews, I recognized exactly how awkward the phrasing on that question was even though it did, eventually, manage to get to the gist of what I was trying to ask. In the later text based interviews, I combined that question with one about friends and family reactions, to come up with the simple question: “How do people react when you tell them you are a gamer?” From that basic question I could ask about playing online with strangers and talking with family members and other friends who might not be gamers themselves. The dynamic nature of this ethnography allowed this evolution to take place and me to realize that less is more, not only in terms of how questions are worded but also in terms of how active I was in the interviews.

It can be a difficult process to step out of the way of your subjects as an interviewer, and it was especially so since I am a gamer as well and have many stories that are similar to my participants’. Some participants wanted more of a conversation, more interaction with me, and others just wanted to tell their own stories. Getting to the point where I could allow myself to step back from the interview was important, as was learning that to do so I needed to follow closely what was important to them. As a researcher, I was much more sensitive to their needs during the instant messenger interviews, noticing the lack of responses to my own stories or other interjections (instant messaging removes many of the conventions present in voice to voice interaction, such as saying “uh huh” or “yes” as someone else is speaking, even if your intention is to quickly move back to your own point). I was also able to follow more closely the leads and interests they had rather than making sure my interview questions were asked in the order I had previously arranged them. The instant messenger interviews also allowed me to take my eyes off the clock; whereas during the voice to voice interviews I was aware of time, I was more engaged

in reading and responding to comments in the instant messenger format. Allowing these “free range” and open ended kind of answers made sorting through the data more difficult and almost as time consuming as the transcriptions, but the outcome is rich, provocative stories that explain why many women are drawn to online gaming, regardless of the difficulties associated with being a part of that culture (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005).

Most researchers discuss similar modes of interviewing subjects, having conducted both face to face and technologically mediated interviews (using the telephone instead of computer voice interviews like those I conducted.) My modes differed greatly; the instant messaging and email communications were inherently different from the voice to voice interviews. However, looking over the transcripts from the face to face and instant messaging interviews from my study, there are many similarities: transcript lengths are similar, though discussion times ran slightly longer in the instant message interviews, lasting about an hour and 20 minutes while most of the voice to voice interviews lasted about an hour, and many of the responses to the interview questions expressed many of the same concerns.

Conclusions and Ideas for Implementation

In essence, I think online qualitative methodology is effective with specific populations. The nature of researching women who play digital role playing games makes this a study of technologically advanced groups and it should be acknowledged that there is still a large population that does not fit into this schema. That does not make this population less worthwhile to study; it is just a smaller population than might be found in looking at other kinds of gaming. (For example, more traditional forms of gaming like board games, cards, and dice.)

Because these women game online, they were comfortable with the technology that I used to conduct the interviews and, as I noted before, had the technology and equipment to participate. I am uncertain if other populations would respond so well to this kind of digital interview process or how much gaming is a microcosm associated with this kind of technology in the first place. Anyone considering using internet technologies to conduct ethnographic or

interview research should consider the comfort level of their participant pool with these technologies.

I am also aware of how fortunate I was to stumble upon a group that was willing to back and help me find research participants. I am fairly certain *The Guild* had no idea the impact that single Tweet would have both on my project and its scope. They simply made an offer and from that emerged an entirely different project than what I first envisioned. I do not think it is surprising that *The Guild* was willing to help me with this – the entire success of the show is based off the fact that their fans liked the web series so much they were willing to make donations to keep the show going during its first season. Now the series has been picked up by Microsoft and Sprint and is still able to be a free show available online and through the Xbox console, serving as an excellent means of advertising for Microsoft's gaming platform.

The primary suggestion I can make for implementing this type of recruitment is to find some media center of the subculture you are studying and see if you can find someone as kind hearted as *The Guild* was about my request. But be forewarned, traveling down the Twitter littered road of ethnographic research can be a messy, and delightful, journey, much like Codex's journey of self-discovery and self-awareness throughout *The Guild*. As a note, Codex was happy to surrender her role as guild leader by the end of the third season, and that is where my parallel experience with her ends. This process began a love of ethnographic research for me which I plan to pursue in future projects.

CHAPTER THREE

Cyber Drag: Gender and Identity in Online Role Playing Games

When I first heard about Felicia Day's music video, "Do you wanna Date my Avatar?" it was through a friend who also studies gaming. He posted the video on his Facebook page with the caption: "Felicia Day: Gaming's first real sex symbol." As I clicked the link, I pondered his words: **real** sex symbol. I would never argue Day's attractiveness – she's a knock out hands down – and as she said in an interview about the video, she wanted to "dress up" like a fantasy heroine, which was one of the motivations for the song in the first place, along with the promotion of the series itself. But the popularity of female heroes in video games is certainly not new. The first Tomb Raider game dates back to 1996 and it seems rash for my friend to dismiss almost 15 years' worth of Lara Croft's presence on the gaming field. But **real**. What did real mean here? Perhaps his comment referenced the fact that many male players adopt female avatars and take on a female gaming identity. "Gender bending," or cyber-drag as I call it throughout this chapter, is a long accepted tradition in role playing games, both digital and offline formats (Fine 2007). This activity is so widespread in some games, such as Eve Online, that GIRL is said to stand for Guy In Real Life. Day is an authentic representation of a gamer; although she is best known as Cyd, the character she plays in *The Guild*, she is also known to play MMORPGs in her "real" life and to have found inspiration for the webseries from her own gaming.

Looking closely at the lyrics of Day's song, it is apparent that she, like many who participate in online role playing games, acknowledges the break between physical reality and your "avatar." The chorus:

Do you wanna date my avatar?

She's a star

And she's hotter than reality by far (Day, "Date my Avatar")

Many cyber studies authors divide the world between real life (RL) and virtual reality (VR) and although that seemed to be a clear and appropriate distinction in the early days of the internet, that binary, like so many others, is highly limiting and borders on insulting to those who embrace online worlds as key components of their lives and identities (Turkle, 1995; Bell, 2001; Nakamura, 2002 and 2008). My friend's declaration of Day as a "real" sex symbol dismisses the reality involved in social gaming and other forms of online identity and the importance many people put on those interactions. As an avid online gamer who games with his wife and other family members often as a means of bridging long physical distances, he should be more sensitive to the blur between online and physical life, recognizing the social benefit and power of "playing" together.

But he is not alone. Many want to dismiss social interactions that do not fit into some pre-described norm as not being real, especially it seems when discussing gaming. Granted, many MMORPGs have fantasy themes, but the social reality played out within the games is far from imaginary. The same social norms that manifest in people's physical lives, the same hindrances and privileges, play out within the game environment; race, class, and gender play out in much the same way online that they do in the physical world, especially as gaming culture embodies enhanced technologies that allow gamers to speak voice to voice with the people they play with and interact in other online social realms like Twitter, Facebook, and game forums

(Higgin, 3-26). These technologies make more transparent many of the biases that people might hold against other players; if players are speaking on voice chat to each other, and another player “sounds dumb” or has a regional accent, that affects how the group views that player’s abilities as a gamer and impacts how the game is played. A downloadable program, “Ventrillo” – or “Vent” for short – is used by most gamers to voice chat while gaming, much like you would on the telephone, just using your computer’s interface instead. Although there is no option within the software itself to alter pitch or voice tone, it is possible for users to separately download software that allows them to change or alter their voice and hide or modify their identity within the game.

Gaming technologies, and with it gaming cultures, have expanded at an astronomical pace over the last 30 years; but even in the early days, before the integrated technologies we have now, video gaming has always thrived through social interaction. It took two players to play Pong, one player for each “paddle,” and even though gamers could play against just the machine itself, it did not hold the same level of engagement or fun as playing another living person. In early first person shooter (FPS) games like Doom, players could network directly to each other’s computers via dial-up modem, and play against each other much the way they might have once played Pong while sitting in front of the television in a friend’s living room.

Character choices and the kind of avatars players could control were very limited in these early networked games. In Doom, one player would play a grey colored avatar and the other a green one, both male, and both identical in every way, from the weapons they could use to the amount of health or hit points (HP) of each character. There was no real question of identity or self-representation – players did not even get to choose if they were the green or the grey character because it was automatically assigned to them based on who initiated the online link.

They simply jumped in the game and starting killings things, the end game usually consisting of trying to kill each other, unless they opted to play in a cooperative mode.

So really, MMORPGs just capitalized on traditions that already existed. Sharing the game has always been more fun and more engaging for players. Performance is often a key component for gamers, defining how they play and the kind of social interactions they seek out or try to avoid online. Some gamers seek to avoid interacting with other players and some female gamers select their race and class based on whether or not they think that avatar will get “hit on.” One gamer I knew personally selected a female gnome character in World of Warcraft because she felt they had the least sexualized bodies. Although many people who engage in social interactions online know that those they play with may or may not match the gender of the avatars they are interacting with, many still operate under the assumption that female players are controlling female avatars. Several online surveys have been done to determine the number of female and male players who perform cyber-drag or “gender-swapping” and the numbers pretty consistently come back the same: about half the female avatars in any online MMO are controlled by male players. MMORPG researcher, Nick Yee, conducted an online survey of EverQuest2 and World of Warcraft players exploring the concept of “gender swapping” and found there were significantly more male players who would select a female avatar than the reverse (Yee, “Psychology”). This “gender swapping” or performance of gender has been taking place since the first text based MMOs existed, so few would be surprised that this trend still exists. Even if a male player declares himself as such while playing a female avatar, telling other players that he is really a guy, he still benefits from the social power associated with female avatars and can “pass” or perform for female identities.

In interviews I conducted with female MMORPG gamers, very few opt to play male avatars. As I will discuss in this chapter, their responses to the question of gender representation online and how those representations are played (or controlled) and simulated (or represented) within the game space revealed several solid trends. I use an interdisciplinary approach, combining feminist performance theory with game and cyber studies, to explore the question of gender and identity online for female players.

Gamer Identity and Performance Theory

Identity online can be just as empowering and important to many people as their identities in their physical lives. Although the assumption still remains for many that the physical world is more important and should be given heightened value over any online or “virtual” reality, people who play online games take their gaming very seriously and many feel that the virtual social interactions are just as “real” as the ones in their physical lives. As my friend’s comment about Felicia Day illustrates, many people believe something is only “real” if it is a physical representation, an idea the lyrics of the song call to the listener’s attention. Avatars are “hotter than reality by far” because they manifest the fantasy associated with online identity; powerful, sexy, and (mostly) anonymous, avatars can be embraced when desired (“Pick a time, send a tell to me”) or dismissed simply with a click of a player’s mouse (“And if you think I’m not the one, log off and we’ll be done”), a relational approach that might be difficult to manage in the physical world.

But in order to begin the game and engage in the MMORPG, the first step is fairly ubiquitous regardless of the game: the gamer must create an avatar, a visual representation that will be a player’s gateway into and companion throughout the game space. The process of

creating an avatar includes selecting a race (the choices vary greatly depending on the game you play), a class (the type of character you play and the abilities they have, like healer or warrior, etc.), a gender (often the only binary choice in the character creation process), and then a range of physical characteristics to be made by looking at various combinations of skin colors, facial features, and, depending on the race you choose and the game played, tattoos, piercings, horns, scars, or rot holes, among others. Although the options might seem limitless with the number of combinations players can come up with, a certain level of homogeneity goes along with the character design of most games. Outside of superhero games like City of Heroes/Villains (CoH/V), body shape is often limited and not a choice that players can manipulate. In City of Heroes/Villains, players can change the shape and physical dimensions of their avatar's bodies, reduce bust size, height, and even create "huge" or super small avatars. Instead, stereotypes associated with both hegemonic masculinity and femininity exist: male avatars often have broad shoulders and well developed muscles regardless of the "race" selected within the game, while female avatars often have large breasts and hyper-sexualized hourglass body shapes. In World of Warcraft, there is some difference in body type based on the race users select during character creation. Female night elves have a very athletic look with a smaller bust line than human female avatars. However, the sexualization of the avatars does not only take place in the avatar's body shape; female night elves have one of the most sexually suggestive dances within the game, so much so that one interviewee described it as a "pole dance." Game developers like Blizzard Entertainment, the designers of World of Warcraft, claim that the reason there is no body change option for players is that the game mechanics prevent them from making those offerings. This rationale is suspect; other games that are similar in design to World of Warcraft have options for changing body shape. Instead, I believe that it is simply easier for game companies to dismiss

the meaning and significance behind the representations they create since that is not their main focus.

Creating an avatar is only one step in performing and shaping an online identity in MMORPGs. Internet users create and form identities, often based on their physical life selves but often embracing other cultures, engaging in what Edward Said calls Orientalism (Said, 1979). Lisa Nakamura applies Orientalism to online identity with the term, “cyber identity tourism,” where users have the ability to take on “Other” selves they can virtually embody and through those bodies visit “Other” lands and social spheres. Nakamura was observing the way people created their own identities in text based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons or Domains), which were early ancestors of the kind of engagement many players find in MMORPGs now, except the “visuals” created in the early days of the internet were written descriptions, authored by the players themselves. Describing this process, Nakamura states:

Role-playing sites on the Internet offer their participants programming features such as the ability to physically “set” one’s gender, race, and physical appearance, through which one can, and indeed in many cases is required to, project a version of the self that is inherently theatrical. . . . it can be said that everyone who participates is “passing,” since it is impossible to tell if a character’s description matches a player’s physical characteristics. (36)

Each player undergoes the process of passing, especially since the “theatricality” of gaming identities in many current MMORPGs has morphed over into fantasy races such as elves, gnomes, and dwarfs. Users understand the paradox generated by identity online but often dismiss the idea that anyone is “passing,” especially in regards to representations of gender. Players are unquestioned about their physical life gender and it is often assumed, even without

the benefit of voice chat, that female players are controlling female avatars. This “passing” works both ways as male players are also often assumed to be controlling male avatars. Perhaps this “acceptance” or assumption of matching gender reflects the consistency so many people assume about gender in the physical world.

Using gender as an organizing ideal, one to define many ideas about “acceptable” behavior, is common in many societies as is the discomfort with any who might challenge those categories or have a gender that is labeled anything different than male or female. As Marjorie Garber points out in *Vested Interests*, the labeling of gender through color coding has not been as stable as we may have thought. Before World War II, the colors we commonly associate with masculine and feminine children, blue and pink respectively, were reversed (Garber 2). Garber argues that anyone falling outside the binary of fe/male gender identity falls victim to a “category crisis,” “disrupting and calling attention to cultural, social, or aesthetic dissonances” (11). As with sexuality in the U.S. military, the idea of “don’t ask, don’t tell” allows players to assume hetero-normative behaviors of the other avatars they interact with throughout their gaming experience. One interview subject, Hontou, tried playing a male avatar and described her word choice and “voice” in online text chat as too feminine. Instead of other players thinking she was a female player with a male avatar, they instead questioned her sexuality and asked if she was gay. The heteronormative assumption by the other players that her male avatar was played by a male player was not supported by her text chat “voice;” she could not pass anymore because her word choice within text chat broke the fantasy and lifted the veil of performance. Hontou quickly decided she was uninterested in playing male avatars, instead returning to female avatars exclusively, and with that choice, an identity she was comfortable maintaining.

Questions of “othered” gendered individuals or sexualities often make people uncomfortable; there is a level of acceptance to the female/male binary, not only through its associations with heterosexuality, but the way it regulates and defines individuals and interactions. This is true for representations and manifestations of gender just as much as it is for race, the topic Said’s Orientalism focuses on. Judith Butler discusses gender and gendered representations in terms of a continuum, where the most interesting aspects of gender performance take place in the grey areas between the black and white that is the male/female binary. Bringing together and building upon Simone de Beauvoir’s (1993) infamous idea that “one is not born a woman but rather becomes one,” and Giles Deleuze’s (Colebrook, 2006) concept of “becoming,” Butler describes a process in which gender might not be such an easily classified category:

Consider the further consequence that if gender is something that one becomes – but can never be – then gender is itself a kind of becoming or *activity*, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an *incessant and repeated action* of some sort.
(Butler, 152, author’s emphasis)

Butler is critiquing de Beauvoir’s focus on gender as a fixed identity, her constructionist mindset. For de Beauvoir and other constructionist thinkers, becoming a woman was an unachievable, ultimate goal society had imposed on women, but at the same time, a goal every woman was expected to work towards. Once you “became” something that approximated the cultural/societal construction recognized as a “woman” you moved into a static state of being. It is now widely accepted among performance theorists that gender is not static, but is by its nature a dynamic process that has to be performed and reproduced on a regular basis, through a myriad

of choices people make. This is where Butler picks up and incorporates Deleuze's concept of becoming. Deleuze critiques Western philosophy's emphasis on "being," which says one has a thought, or concept, and then moves forward from there to create a larger framework or theory. Instead, he suggests, all thought is already in process, rhizomatic rather than structured like a tree, and continually full of movement. An attachment to the idea of fixed gender identities is especially true for many non-academics, who consider gender to be determined from birth by the sex of the baby; as the physical sex of a body is unchanging, many believe that to be true of gender as well. Deleuze pushes past this finite, fixed, and absolute idea of identity, in the case gendered identity, into a place where one is constantly in a state of "becoming," a dynamic existence (Colebrook, 12). This idea of "un-fixing" gender, of moving a social construct that is often seen as stable, unmoving, and mired in physical bodies, into a place where it becomes changeable and, more importantly, a choice for people to perform and then repeat that performance, empowers and changes the experience and performance of gender online.

Perhaps, for online gamers, simply the consistency of what gendered avatar they choose to play signifies the gender that players are *becoming* within the game. That choice, to either represent your physical world gender, or to break from it, is the thing that defines a person's online gender. The choice players make when they face the character creation screen and check the box for either male or female is where that action of gender performance begins and, because players choose to return to that gender again and again, and repeat that presentation, is where the identity is created and maintained. Of course, players can create new avatars and new representations just as easily as they can maintain the ones they have already created, as is demonstrated by Hontou, who decided she did not like the assumptions that were being made about her sexuality based on her questionable performance of masculinity. She did not abandon

the game – just that avatar and with it an identity that she was uninterested in maintaining through performances/becomings.

Players no longer have the option to create “neutral” genders as people did in the early days of MMOs and now the visual markers of gender in online games are unambiguous, based on the female/male dichotomy. But players still manifest their own gender through many of the choices they make, including how their own voice is heard, both in writing and in speaking on programs like Vent (see endnote 4) that allow players to converse with each other voice to voice while they play. But these presentations of gender can still be questioned because the material reality, the physical presence of the player, is still a question. Kath Weston, in *Gender in Real Time*, complicates the basis of feminist performance theory by incorporating time into a materially based ideology. Although repetition is key to performance, the performances must have a certain continuity in order to be perceived as authentic and true. Weston ties this repetition and authenticity to manufacturing and discusses how repeated performances do not always equal reality or authenticity. Weston is building on the process Walter Benjamin describes in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*; the repeated creation of a work of art by a mechanical printing press does not recreate the original and that reproduction essentially lessens the value of the original (Benjamin, 1969). In applying this to gender and gender performance, Weston argues that attention needs to be paid to how time changes the perceptions of performance and the pieces that make that performance more or less authentic (Weston, 85-89).

Weston critiques the tendency in performance theory to focus on the material presentations of gender – realities that become commodified and fetishized by the material purchases that people make in order to maintain their gendered identity. She argues that the real

power of gender is located in the social relations associated with gender. Weston critiques the placement of gender and gender performance solely within a material world; instead, she offers the challenge that time, in terms of a historical narrative and individual moments, must be taken into consideration when discussing the social power of gender. Performances of gender change over time, both in the sense that their significance changes socially, and individual performances change as well. In her critique of performance theory, she states that focusing on the material gendering “fetishizes gender by relocating gender in the hair, beads, muscles . . . even the stories people draw on to call gender into being through performance. What this tendency to perceive gender as the property of possession – or as a product of the significance culturally attributed to possessions – obscures is gender’s character as an aspect of social relations” (13). Weston’s critique draws attention to the fact that turning gender into a commodity fetish removes the most important component of gender: its social power. Essentially, focusing on gender as a physical manifestation distracts from the power that gender has socially.

Because the performance of online gender is typically static, the power associated with it remains constant. Very little changes in terms of avatar presentations throughout the game; female avatars always do the same dance moves, speak the same lines, tell the same jokes, and have the same basic look, thus replicating the same gender performances over and over with a precision that is not available to people in their off-line or physical lives. Players, on the other hand, in their physical lives and in the voice they use in online chat, have great variety in the choices they can make as to how to present themselves. Male players who chose female avatars have the option to disclose to those they play with that they are physically men, and the opposite is true as well. They can maintain the performance of a female persona or not; the choice is up to them. But they may still benefit from the social power held by female avatars within the

social relations of the game. For example, battle equipment and gold (in-game currency) are often randomly gifted to female avatars with no social expectation for return services or confirmation that the player was female. In my own experiences playing female avatars online, I have been gifted gold or currency in-game, once from a guild member that I knew was a male player. Other times I have been gifted cash in-game, exclusively from male avatars, but I have no way of knowing if the player was male. Several research participants noted that the phenomenon of “random gifting” is much more common at the lower levels, where it is assumed that the players lack experience and game prowess, and where the assumptions about gender seem more prevalent. When players max out their experience, the tables often turn with other players randomly asking for equipment or begging for gold. The off-line gender of the player becomes less important at these higher levels as well because a certain amount of mastery over the game is assumed.

In the stories that follow, I explore the responses of research participants as they discuss experiences with gender and role playing games. Their experiences, not surprisingly, vary greatly, but one thing remains constant; each participant expressed no hesitation in talking about how gender impacted her gaming experience. While few of the female gamers I talked to actually played male avatars, almost all of them had some experience with thinking about or considering gender in-game, and were conscious of the connections between their offline identities and the identities they were creating within the game. These stories express the joys and frustrations they experienced becoming women who game.

Gamer Girl Stories

One of the main questions I focused on during the interviews centered on character creation and the choices that female gamers make as they begin a new character. Using a general tour guide approach, I asked a very open ended question and then probed about race and class as well as the smaller details open to players, like facial characteristics and tattoos. The starting point for this section of the interview was, “Tell me about how you go about selecting and creating an avatar.” The interviewees enjoyed this question, and most had a very detailed process they use as they approach character creation, often including very detailed character back stories that directly contribute to the choices they make about the look of their avatar. There is a high level of awareness among many gamers of the idea that they are creating a version of themselves as they generate their avatars. Few opt to “randomize” the features and instead take great amounts of time to select hair styles, hair and skin colors, and other details, often noting they could spend “hours” considering avatar options.

One interviewee, Callie, said she always looks for the “prettiest face,” repeating several times that looking for “pretty” features was important to her:

Well, I tend to make red heads if it’s an option, cause that’s what I am . . . So you know I always try to pick the prettiest face and um even on Horde characters where sometimes it’s really hard, I try to always make a pretty character. . . . if I have a certain character in mind I try to make them very pretty. Some of the faces are prettier than others, some are scowling, or frowning. I stay away from those and try to make them the most attractive character that I can.

Although Callie does not directly acknowledge that she is looking for the pretty face because it is how she wants to see herself, it is clear that she thinks about self-representation here. She picks

red heads because that is the color hair she has, and later admits to the fact that “a lot of real world carries over” into not only creating her avatar but also into how she plays the game, noting that she tends to be a pack rat in her physical life and in-game as well. Being “pretty” is an important component of the online identity that she is creating while developing her character’s physical appearance.

Callie has another reason behind playing World of Warcraft. Aside from enjoying a mild “addiction to achievement” around leveling characters and being an “alt-aholic,” (a player who has multiple alternative characters to play) she is in a long distance relationship (CA and TX) and she and her boyfriend play together. An interesting aspect of their game play is that he chooses to play female characters, and she does as well. As they are playing, they call each other “sisters.” She describes a night when she was frustrated leveling a new character and her boyfriend said to her, “Don’t worry – your big sister is on the way to help.” Here the two of them blur the heterosexual lines and definitions often created by the boxes of boyfriend/girlfriend relationships; by performing a female identity online, Callie’s boyfriend takes on a different role in her life. Her “big sister” (in the guise of a higher level female avatar) is going to help her through a frustrating experience and help her reach a new level of achievement. There is a sense of camaraderie here that might not be possible in a different kind of gendered relationship and aids in them being close to one another over a long distance. Along with this sense of camaraderie lies the knowledge that while she might be the “little sister” right now, she has the potential to not only become an equal to her “big sister” but also to possibly surpass her “elder” in both skill and experience. Gaming provides a place where this is a possibility for heterosexual couples while, in contrast, they might have difficulty achieving this

at other times out of game – not because of their relationship per se, but because of the societal pressures placed on romantic, heteronormative female/male relationships.

They also use their offline relationship to help perform gender together while playing. Another player they both know thinks her boyfriend is really a female player. As they group together, Callie's boyfriend whispers to her and tells her to make sure she uses the right pronouns when she talks in the group chat to help maintain the illusion or gender performance. When I ask her why they did this she said, "He wanted to see just how long we could keep it up." As far as I know, the performance is still being maintained. This collusion is another means of working together to achieve a goal; they both perform gender together to "keep up" the illusion of her boyfriend's femininity. This helps them maintain their long distance relationship, by reinforcing their ability to problem solve and work together, and becomes another way for them to stay close over the miles.

Another subject, CarmenGrey, talks about how she selects female avatars and describes her favorite response from a male player as he was being chided for selecting female avatars:

Um well I pretty much just play women. Um you know I don't need to . . . I've never felt the need to play a guy and one time a friend of mine was getting . . . we were in another group and somebody was teasing him about how he always played girl characters and we were playing CoH [City of Heroes] at the time. And his answer always still cracks me up, they were like, "What are you? Do you want to be a woman? Are you looking for surgery? What's going on?" And he's like, "Well no, see I figure that if I am going to spend this much time staring at something's ass I was gonna stare at a woman's ass. So why are YOU guys

playing MEN?” [she laughs] And I always thought that was funny because he’s looking at where he’s at and what he sees.

CarmenGrey’s friend is calling attention to one of the popular reasons male players have given for playing female avatars: avatar choices being related to enjoying the physical look of the avatar. Even in season three of *The Guild*, there is a scene where Codex/Cyd (the main character played by Felicia Day) has a discussion with one of the rival guild members about his avatar choice. She observes that he plays two female avatars and he responds with, “Well what’s wrong with that? I like women, I like to look at women, so I play women. [pause] I like your shoes.” What quoting the show does not explain is the fact that the rival guild member is portrayed as effeminate, and is potentially a homosexual representation. Earlier in the season he is seen at work where he is an interior designer familiar with the terminology and technology behind specific kinds of fabric. But in this interaction he defends a heteronormative identity and plays up that he, like other heterosexual men, likes to look at women and that is why he plays female avatars. What makes CarmenGrey’s story significant is the fact that the guys who were making fun of her friend assumed he was representing an idealized version of himself. According to them, he was sacrificing his masculinity by playing a female avatar; because they operated under the assumption that people play themselves, the only reason he might have for playing a female character is that he wanted to be a woman. He ends up turning their questionable logic back on them and in doing so reinforces his own masculinity while calling theirs into question. This trade off was not as successful for *The Guild* character; his comment about Codex/Cyd’s shoes lets the audience know that he is performing a heterosexual identity at that time because he feels compelled to do so on some level; perhaps, he feels as much pressure

as some female players feel about “fitting into” a subculture that is often portrayed as hyper-masculine.

CarmenGrey’s story calls attention to many of the facets of online identity and the focus many players have on representing an idealized self. Obviously, the other players knew he was physically a male player. CarmenGrey did not specify if it was through voice chat or whether her friend had self-proclaimed his offline masculine identity to the group, but it is clear that the disconnect was known to everyone. And the fact that it was years later when I interviewed her, and that this is the story she opted to tell me when I asked a very general question about gender selection in the character creation process, demonstrates that these are thoughts and ideas that players regularly consider while they are playing.

Selecting an avatar based on how “attractive” it is certainly is not something that is limited to choices made by male players. Callie, who looked for “pretty faces,” only played one male character and he was her “bank character,” not one that she actually played and leveled like her female characters. Other female players consciously play female avatars because they know a large percentage of the male population plays female avatars and they want more female avatars to be played by women players:

And most of my avatars were female. I had one or two male avatars but I never really played them. I felt like there needed to be more female avatars that are actually played by a chick. [she laughs] So the couple of male avatars I had were just curiosity to see what it would be like to have that species (race) as both but I never really ran them. All my higher level characters were female. And it seems like online nowadays there are a lot more female gamers, a lot more women getting into it. (Zoe)

For Zoe, it was a conscious choice to be a female player and to play a female avatar. She understood from her gaming experiences that many female avatars were male players and she wanted to be represented in-game in a way that aligned with her physical life experiences and gender. That component of her offline life was important, and differentiated her from the majority of people who played at the time. She notes the increase in female players and how that is a fantastic trend but even that did not shake her from wanting to represent her physical world gender online. She wanted to be known as a woman gamer and felt a certain pride associated with that identity. Many women gamers feel that same way, partially because identifying as a female gamer (gamer girl, grrrl gamer, etc.) sets them apart from the dominant stereotype associated with gamers for so long: the socially inept white male living in his mother's basement. The fact that women are a growing group in gaming communities only adds to the attraction and the power associated with gaming for many female players, a trend that is spawning many fan groups and subcultures of its own. The Entertainment & Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA) put together a white paper in 2004 discussing trends around women gamers. According to their research, women gamers are the largest growing group of gamers in the world. Looking at statistics from the UK, Korea, the US, Japan, and four other countries, women's participation in gaming is evident (Krotoski, 26).

For the handful of women who play or have played male avatars in the past, the considerations during avatar creation are pretty much the same as those for players creating female avatars. They are paying attention to how attractive the avatar is and what kind of impression they will make as they enter the game with this character. For Arin, her process was almost the opposite of Callie's; where Callie was looking to be "pretty," Arin noticed that many

players selected highly attractive female avatars so she decided to go the opposite route, which led to an interesting process in her own self-identification:

Arin: when i first started playing, it dawned on me, all the guys played beautiful women, no one ever plays the ugly character. so my toon started out as a male.

Arin: and an *ugly* human male :o mean face, brutal >:O

RM: so that is your pally? an "ugly" human male?

Arin: which always made me laugh, because my ugly human male was running around going "look it the pretty bunnies!"

RM: that is awesome

Arin: he was. he's now a she. when they added the ability to switch genders, i moved back over to him being a female.

Arin: tho i still think of her as a he :O

RM: really?

RM: it just became part of your thinking about the game? or that toon at least?

Arin: i played him for so long as a male that it just stuck with me.

Arin: there are times that i miss seeing me, because i'm looking for that ugly guy

Arin's gender identity with her character is a study in contrasts; she selected a male avatar because she was looking to play the opposite of what most players gravitated towards, attractive, female representations. By making that choice to play an "ugly guy," she still infused him with her personality, indicating her femaleness – or female voice at least – in how she interacted with the game space. Her word choice and "voice," much like Hontou's mentioned earlier, indicated her female gender and her interest in things that would be considered feminine (bunnies, and other non-goal oriented game objects). She did not have any experiences where other players

questioned her sexuality, but rather she identified herself so strongly with the male avatar, that even after she changed the gender, she did not identify with the female version in the same way she did the male version, having almost disregarded the gender of the avatar because that image was what she became while playing. It is important to note here that she did not mention whether or not she made an unattractive female avatar, but it seems likely that she simply thought the female avatars were more attractive by default.

Another female player, Wen, selected a male avatar for two reasons; because she thought they would be less likely to be hit on, and because she worried that there would be a bias against female tanks. Contrary to her expectations, Wen found female toons (and quite possibly female players) to be “shameless” in their sexual overtures:

Wen: When i played Thron

Wen: I didn't tell anyone I was actually female at the keys

RM: ah so that was part of your role play?

Wen: Remember how I said I chose a male toon so I wouldn't get flirted with?

RM: Yes, I do

Wen: Those girls are SHAMELESS!

RM: really???

Wen: I mean to say! One girl accosted me outside the bank in Stormwind

Wen: and was /petting my horse

Wen: and told me that the "Commanding shout" emote made her.. uh..

Wen: Well, in my guild we call it "Happy in the pants"

RM: hehhehe

Wen: Poor Thron. He's just a farm boy, really, quite unused to the citified ways of

Stormwind girls

Wen: I /ignored her after that

Much like Arin, whose own performance of a female identity through in-game chat might have “given away” her physical gender, Wen thought she would avoid interacting with stereotypical masculine behaviors by choosing to play a male avatar. Unfortunately, she encountered the same behaviors playing male and female avatars, and told me that in her experience, female avatars were hit on more often than males but it was not an exclusively female avatar experience. She did not, however, have such a colorful story for her female avatars. It is unfortunate that Wen did not discover the true gender identity of the player that was hitting on her; it seems likely, given the high percentage of female avatars controlled by male players, that this could have been a male player performing an idealized, or fantastic, version of femininity. Perhaps this was the kind of experience he would have appreciated when he was playing a male avatar. This is related to one of the main reasons women players discuss wanting to play female avatars in their RPG experiences; they want to make sure that women gamers are represented as female avatars since they know so often this is not the case.

Many of the women I have spoken to have discussed how the image and understanding of women gamers has changed over the time they have played. Many had stories in which it was a surprise at one time for male gamers to learn they were really women and how that would often lead to lewd comments and come-ons. Zoe, who has played World of Warcraft for five years, said:

When I first started playing WoW it was always like the “oh you’re REALLY a girl . . . REALLY REALLY!” . . . And now it’s more common that you get a lot

of older (players) but back then it seemed to be predominately teenagers and 20 somethings. And back then it was like after they heard that I was a girl then automatically they had to hit on me. And it's like. I don't hit on you because I know you're a dude. I don't see why just because I'm suddenly a chick you have to put on the schmooze. Like you were treating me just normal five minutes ago like I was just another player. Then "oh you're really a chick! I've got to schmooze the chick." The chick's here – I've got to prove I'm a dude by hitting on her.

Zoe's observations are not uncommon in MMORPGs; the player population is quite diverse in age, race, gender, and location, and with its continual growth in popularity, World of Warcraft has a huge market base. In the time since the first visual MMOs appeared, many more women have begun to play and now it seems women gamers have become not so much of a rarity as to elicit such sexist responses from other players.

Zoe, having played online RPGs for several years, has witnessed the change in perception about women gamers and the performance of masculinity that is often associated with gaming online. She describes in this experience how, upon finding out she was a female player, male players often felt the need to hit on her in order to prove their masculinity. They needed everyone to know they were male in real life, not just performing masculinity in the game, and in order to do so they had to "hit on" a female player. This demonstrates how hegemonic masculinity maps into the game; male players feel the need to prove their sexual power and as soon as they know they have a female player to subject that power to, they take it. This allows them two kinds of reaffirmation: their own sense of their sexual power and a demonstration of that power to the group. Not so long ago many male players assumed women only gamed

because their boyfriends did and although for many that might have been an introduction to gaming, many of the women I have talked to have formed their own gaming identities, moving away from exclusively playing the games their partners play and into selecting games they enjoy themselves. This signifies a small movement forward for women gamers and gaming culture in general; however, I do not mean to suggest that all is equal within game culture but rather that the popular stereotypes about women as gamers are changing.

Conclusions

In *Play Between Worlds*, T.L. Taylor explores the social significance of MMOs. As an avid EverQuest player, she explores gaming both online and in off-line player events like Fan Faire where players meet in real life and complete “live quests” much as they do within the game. Taylor discusses many aspects of social gaming and MMO players, dedicating an entire chapter to “power gamers” and how their method of play shifts significantly from the dominant paradigms associated with gaming. She also has a chapter completely devoted to female players and their experiences within MMORPGs. In this chapter she suggests that female players online may access “gender identities” that are “socially prohibited or delegitimized offline – a simultaneously sexy and powerful or masculine and beautiful persona” (97). She goes on to say that women participate in “gender swapping” in these online games and mentions how that follows in a long standing Live Action Role Play (LARP) tradition of pushing your identity past its physical world boundaries (Taylor 100). She contextualizes her research within her own gaming and talks about the responses she has gotten from interview subjects and her own experiences gaming.

Although Taylor does mention this play with identity as a key component of women's identities within the game, she does not unpack some of the more complicated intricacies involved in creating an online game identity. She does dispel some of the more obvious stereotypes associated with female gamers – most importantly calling attention to the fact that they are interested in competition just as much as their male counterparts – but her findings conflict with my own. She does not quote any female gamers who engage in cyber drag online nor does she define how they might go about creating a “masculine and beautiful” persona in terms other than simply mastering the game. She acknowledges some fan art that is ambiguous in terms of the gender presented but that is where the discussion ends.

The responses from many women in my interview pool seem to be in contrast to Taylor's experience of more “flexibility” and play associated with gender in MMORPGs. Women players, it seems, are gravitating almost exclusively to female avatars and their reasons for doing so are as varied as the players themselves. One woman I interviewed, PinkGeek, actively wondered if she had missed something because she had never even considered playing a male avatar until I asked her if she did. After thinking about it she explained how she wanted to “see herself” as she played the game because she is “completely sufficient to enter into this battle and as a woman, I want to see myself being part of the adventure.” Her response calls forth the social construction that women are often seen as “less than” simply because of their gender. By taking on a powerful female character in an online game, a space where Taylor acknowledges there is no bias against world exploration and avatar power based on the gender selected, she can be not only the match to a male player but, perhaps, become even better. Gaming, for PinkGeek, is a place where she can engage becoming her own action hero.

Where I imagined cyber drag to be a possible means of empowerment for female players, instead I discovered the empowerment comes from embracing a virtual form of their own femininity and being able to see themselves as powerful, kick-ass avatars who can go where they want and do as they please without being hemmed in by many of the limitations they experience in their physical lives. They want to be gamer girls; powerful, sexy, and in control, and they are willing to play hyper sexualized avatars because the freedom and agency associated with online gaming and what they learn about themselves through those experiences is valuable and important and **real**.

So Felicia Day's avatar may have been physically hotter than reality by far, but the personal experience of women gamers is just as real and just as powerful and important. Are the avatars hot? Yes, but confidence is hotter than anything else and if that is what women gain from gaming, then game on!

CHAPTER FOUR

Playing with Identities: Gamer Types and *Real Life*

As the first season of *The Guild* draws to a close, the audience witnesses an epic transformation, not just of the heroine, Cyd, but the other members of the Knights of Good. They take on their first “real world” boss, Zaboo’s mom, and through the group’s combined efforts, help Zaboo resolve some of the more destructive behaviors present in a suffocating mother/son relationship. Each guild member provides support to the emotionally challenged Zaboo, building on skills that they have learned and honed throughout the game and group interactions. Zaboo explains to his mom that he wants to move out, and is immediately backed up by Vork’s logic, Tink’s cunning observations, and Cyd and Clara’s emotional support. Finally, Bladezz stages a rogue sneak attack that provides the final critical hit when he explains that Zaboo attempted to kill himself because of his mother’s constant interference in his life and her smothering nature. It is the shocking truth of this last observation that causes Zaboo’s mom to leave the restaurant where they are meeting and give Zaboo the independence he needs to further his personal growth with the help of his guild-mates over the next three seasons. Each of the Knights of Good demonstrated his or her own interpersonal skill set and solidified a specific role in the group dynamic. As this chapter will discuss, *The Guild* characters provide an excellent jumping off point for my own typology of gamers, which explores the interactions between representation and identity in-game and the possible connections to their out of game, or offline, life.

In the opening scene of the series, Cyd's therapist tells her that she needs to form a "genuine" social network of friends, and that gaming has only provided her with an a means of sublimation from many of the other issues in her life. Rather than turning her back on the other members of her guild and her only social outlet, Cyd instead turns them into the kind of support network they all need and even though tensions continue between individual players through the rest of the series, they coalesce as a group and emerge victorious and more confident than when they first met.

As a Zeitgeist combining gaming and pop culture, *The Guild* proves great fodder for discussion and a metaphor for much of what I discovered through this research. As previously mentioned, it was *The Guild's* Twitter feed that led to my overwhelming number of potential participants for the ethnography. Each character in *The Guild* is an exaggerated representation of a specific type of gamer, and personifies different personal motivations to game. This chapter will use *The Guild* characters to help examine how offline and online identities interact with each other and explore the different categories of gamers that I saw emerge throughout the interview process, namely the primary groups of Self Players, Role Players, and Neutral Players.

Identity in Digital Role Playing Games

In one of the first texts exploring how people interact in Massively Multiplayer environments, "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs," written in 1996 by Richard Bartle, four distinct types of players are discussed. Using the metaphor of the four suits in a traditional card deck, Bartle defines the four groups and how these groups engage with each other within the online environment. Hearts are social players, those who engage online realities in order to connect emotionally with other players in a variety of ways (like chatting about

offline life issues, or possibly flirting with other players, etc.). Clubs are “killers” or players who engage MMOs in order to inflict their power on other players (in ways like attacking players in a Player vs Player battle arena or server). Diamonds are achievers who seek out levels of achievement in the game, such as scoring high level gear and treasures or game currency (like gold in World of Warcraft or Isk in Eve). Spades are explorers, looking at discovering the environment, and perhaps hidden game areas, as a key component to playing an MMO (Bartle, 1996).

Writing in the early days of MUDs (Multi User Domains), Bartle intended to instruct people interested in organizing their own MUD as to how best to keep it going. A mix of these four types of players would make for a successful environment; an imbalance of social players or “killers” (or the other groups) would likely cause strife among the players and could eventually lead to the dissolution of the environment entirely (Bartle, 1996). In current MMOs, the continuation of the environment is not left to the users themselves. Online games are big business, creating great amounts of revenue for game companies that have in turn invested a lot into the creation and maintenance of the game. Even in a free environment that has a large component of player created content, like Second Life, the company that hosts the game server (Linden Lab) is still invested in a monetary return, and it is unlikely that the game or environment would cease to exist simply because there is an imbalance in player types. Most “free” online games are free only in terms of basic access to the game and the game components. Many “areas” of Second Life, or specialized content like that available in Lord of the Rings Online, are available only after “earning” currency in-game (i.e. time spent playing) but are also available immediately if players are willing to shell out the cash for a subscription or pay for individual features. At the time Bartle was writing, maintaining an online community was

almost entirely the responsibility of the players themselves because they often created and maintained the server space on their own.

To a small degree, this remains true in current gaming environments. Player groups like guilds are driven by the actions of the players and their longevity is often due to how the players interact with each other. The characters in the series, *The Guild*, demonstrate a complex balance of Bartle's theory, with socializers (Clara and Codex), achievers (Vork and Tink) and killers (Bladezz) all represented. The imbalance issue Bartle discusses could be partially related to the longevity, or lack thereof, of certain guilds. Having a balance of player types and personalities is necessary to a positive player experience and to their efficiency as a group (Bartle, 1996).

Although guilds (World of Warcraft) or super groups (City of Heroes) or kins (Lord of the Rings Online) are often a useful tool for players, their success or failure rarely affects the overall game success, even if it directly affects individual player experience. As is clear throughout the show, however, guilds and the social networks created through these groups can be important parts of identity for gamers. Many of the players I talked to throughout my research held it as a point of pride to either be associated with a powerful guild, or that they had a level of longevity with the same guild, often noting how many years they had played with the same group of people. It was not uncommon to find players who spent more than five years gaming with the same people, a fact many participants shared with great pride, and in those cases many of them had met in person at gaming conferences or created offline events on their own.

Many of Bartle's definitions correlate with stories from the interviews I conducted; for example, CarmenGrey spoke extensively of her love for playing subtlety rogues in World of Warcraft simply because she had the ability to explore the environment on her own, and to investigate the game design without having to be in a group for protection. Subtlety rogues have

a specific set of characteristics that allow the player to be virtually invisible in the landscape, and sneak up on foes without warning. This allows CarmenGrey to enter a high level instance that requires a group and then explore on her own, a flexibility of play not often seen in MMORPGs. She would easily fit into the category of a Spade, digging around the virtual environment and finding personal, experiential treasures. She took great pleasure in knowing she had witnessed NPC conversations that many miss because of their tendency to push toward the end game alone, not taking the time to experience the environment in any detail. CarmenGrey felt powerful in this way; being able to be on her own in-game and to find secret and hidden places and experiences that might not be open to a traditional “group.”

This is part of what dates Bartle’s text, even if his typology descriptions can still be seen within current gamers. His definitions are lacking in key ideas or themes that I saw emerge throughout the interviews I conducted, specifically in terms of self-identity and performance. Since my questions were directed at exploring how people’s real life identities map onto the virtual landscape, Bartle’s player types only scratch the surface of what was important to players. He also spends a great deal of time discussing how the various groups interact with each other, a factor that is less important now that MMO content is mostly generated by third parties and not the players themselves. The technologies associated with MMO games now allow players to actively choose the type of in-game experiences they will have, from places where people can choose to be “killers” (battlegrounds) or to socialize (inns and taverns), to what class (healer, tank, damage dealers, etc.) of character they will play, which tends to have greater impact on game play in general.

Within the typology I created for this study, I want to foster a sense of inclusiveness; binaries and other modes of classification often cut people up into small boxes and label them as

such. Because I view identity as being fluid and transient, I want the categories to be that way, too. This desire for flexible categories comes directly from my own experience identifying myself within the world of gaming; my experience has been varied and complex, and has changed over time and been affected by my own mastery of the games I play. The same is true for the women that I interviewed. As I went through the process of coding the interview data, I came up with three main categories of players but I also allowed myself the room to group more than one of these categories together, essentially creating a combination of six different player types.

RPG Player Typology

Self Players see themselves as their avatars and identify strongly with them. They are more likely to refer to their avatars in the first person, placing their own identities within the game and the game environment. The concept of the idealized self would be the strongest with this group and they would tend to see gaming as a means of reaffirming self-identity. Players in this group might focus on how attractive their avatars are and avoid avatars they find have too many inhuman characteristics or unattractive features, or who are too different from their own offline life identity. Socializing would be a means of connecting in relation to physical world lives, where they would share accurate information about their offline lives and personalities. Because of their strong personal attachment to their avatars, they are likely to be the group least aware of the limitations placed on them by in-game representations, especially in terms of the hypersexuality often associated with female avatars.

Role Players embrace the role-playing aspect of the game, creating a different identity and back story for their characters. They might see the avatars as part of their own identity but

only in a minimal way because their primary goal is to create a new, alternative identity. They see their avatars as separate identities that they can take on or off, and the performance of these fictional characters is the primary attraction to the game, and especially to MMORPG gaming since they are likely to find others with similar interests there. These players would be more likely to discuss their avatars in the third person and often have long, detailed fictional back stories supporting their character's identity and appearance. They would desire social interactions that allow for active role playing, where there is a clear line between themselves and their avatars, and the same is true for those they game with. This group is perhaps the most psychologically sophisticated of the three primary groups discussed because of the performance of identity inherent in role playing. They are also more comfortable with cyber-drag, as discussed in a previous chapter, because there is a long tradition of gender bending in all variations of role playing games.

Neutral Players do not necessarily see a connection between their identities and their avatars or create separate, fictional personalities or back-stories for their avatars. They are likely to be more interested in the game mechanics or in certain achievements, getting to a place where they demonstrate high levels of mastery over the game itself. They might be described as more "hardcore" gamers as it is the game they are most interested in engaging with rather than the social aspects of gaming, especially the social aspects of MMORPGs. Neutral Players are more likely to switch back and forth between first and third person pronouns as they describe their avatars because they are not aware of or do not care about the differentiation between self and avatar that is paramount to the other categories. For Neutral Players, the game is not a metaphor for life and in-game achievement is not symbolic of other aspects of their identity; the game is simply a game, an arena where mastery and status are achieved for the game itself.

Subcategories: The subcategories are combinations of each of the above groups: Neutral/Self, Role Play/Self, Neutral/Role Play.

Typology Breakdown: The largest group, by far, in the interview pool are Self Players. Of 28 interviews, 12 coded as Self Players, five Neutral, four Role Play, three Neutral/Role Play, three Neutral/Self, and one Role Play/Self. (See Appendix C.)

Examples and Trends

It comes as no surprise that Self Players are the largest category of players represented in the sample. There are a number of reasons why this trend emerged from the research, not the least of which is the inherent connection between the players I interviewed and the show *The Guild*. The representations in *The Guild* are almost exclusively Self Players, where each character fosters a strong interpersonal attachment to her or his online identity. For example, when Cyd is talking on the phone with her therapist and gaming at the same time, she says, “You’re killing me. Literally.” Another example is that when Cyd introduces herself to someone she is wanting to impress (a sexually attractive neighbor), she stumbles over her name, first giving her powerful alter-ego’s name (Codex) and then correcting herself. For other members of *The Guild*, the connection between self and avatar is also clear but perhaps not as glaring as Clara’s use of her offline name as her avatar’s name as well. This is met with surprise by one of the other guild members, Vork, who also has a strong identification with his online persona. As he introduces himself he says, “I’m Herman, call me Vork. I simply respond to it better.”

Virtual representations of the self, even if they are dressed up as othered representations, have been discussed by cyber studies scholars since the advent of the internet. The large number

of self gamers in this research follows trends that have been observed for over a decade. It is the smaller groups that stand out and bear further discussion and observation, adding new material to an on-going conversation. I will first discuss the Role Players that I discovered through my research, and how they react and interact with their avatars. Then I will discuss Neutral Players, sharing some of my own experiences as a gamer in conjunction with those in the study. Throughout this discussion, I will compare both these groups with the Self Players that dominated the study.

When I started this research, I had no idea that the RP in MMORPG could stand for role playing in terms of the people who play the game actually acting out parts as one would in a play. It should not have been a surprise; many of the fantasy MMOs are based on physical, in person role playing games, one of the longest standing and most well known being Dungeons and Dragons. Many of the conventions of online game mechanics come directly from these originally dice based, pen and paper games, where individuals made up their own characters within a certain set of parameters. Although this history exists within many of the more popular games today, the actual mechanics exist mostly in the background of the game and are not often witnessed during active game play. For example, for a player in World of Warcraft to see his or her “rolls,” (the way damage is measured in-game) she or he would have to click on the “Combat Log” and look back over how the battle went down blow by blow and point by point. The default selection on the log screen for many MMORPGs is always the general chat, where players see “tells” (private messages) or general, trade, and guild chat channels, thus placing value on the human interactions associated with the game rather than the rules or combat scores. So the idea that players were emulating this same type of fantasy play, where they created characters separately from themselves, was a new one for me to see in MMORPGs, and it stood

out for that reason. This is a deviation especially from gamers that play more arcade games, for example, Bejeweled, Collapse, or Angry Birds. Rarely in arcade games is there an image or a “self” to identify with, the game play being focused more on a specific skill and eventually “beating” the game. Although many participants played games like Bejeweled, those games are not a place where they focused comments or ideas related to the research questions. Instead, they were often mentioned as a means of more “casual” gaming that takes less time commitment and planning to play. In fact, the Role Players were the least likely to engage in this type of gaming, and the Self and Neutral Players often said they would play arcade games to “kill time at work.”

The first interview I conducted was with an avid Role Player, one who not only role plays in-game but also in other online forums like Live Journal, as well as with groups of friends offline. Seimiya selected the class and race of her avatar based on her desire to role play, as she describes here:

I am actually a role player. Role playing is sort of my first love and WoW comes second to it. And when I originally made my blood elf priest, I had intended to role play very seriously with her, which is the reason why I wanted her to be a priest and I wanted her to be a blood elf because I wanted her to heal, and be this very soft spoken character who you know sort of coerced into this domestic lifestyle by her father and escapes and becomes a battle priest. That was my original intention. Obviously that sort of box wouldn't work for any other race in the Horde because they are generally a militaristic bunch.

As Seimiya describes, much of her game play was influenced directly by the kind of story she wanted to create for her character. She had many ideas in mind, both about how the character acts (she is “soft spoken”) and the history behind her choices (escapes parental control to become a battle priest). In what is usually a very broad category for Self Players, who often describe

healing as their class preference because it requires more skill, Seimiya takes that broad category and makes it much more detailed and complete, filled with a rich history. Because she exclusively plays Horde characters (one side of the good guys/bad guys divide that defines the races in World of Warcraft), she is also limited in her selection of race; Blood Elves are known as magic abusers and are small framed and are more attractive in terms of the Western beauty ideal, rather than the more fantastic and animalistic forms of the Tauren or Orcs. She explains later in the interview that although she does love role playing, she finds World of Warcraft a poor medium for it because all of the heroic activities that are achieved within the game can be conquered by most players, where in actual role playing only one set of adventurers might slay the proverbial dragon. But even with those limitations, the characterization still lives on for her and is demonstrated in how she talks about the character as having an identity separate from herself.

Seimiya very clearly discusses her avatar in the third person, not mixing up the referents of “she” throughout the interview. She draws very clear line between herself and her character. She does refer to the avatar as “my blood elf priest” but I believe this to be less a personal attachment and more a stating of her ownership of the character itself. This is a common occurrence in the Role Player interview transcripts, where the ownership lies in the type of character they have created as opposed to Self Players who identify with their avatars as ideal extensions of themselves. McSherrrie is another example of a Role Player who creates extensive back stories for her characters and relates those stories to every aspect of the character design:

If we take a look at the necromancer, I gave her a pretty rough back story you know. I had to come up with a reason why she would choose this as a way of life. The vast majority of people do not like spending time around dead bodies even if they are animated, so why does she? And I went through and I came up with a

back story about how her parents had been necromancers because their land had been conquered. Clearly they're going to have to be in fairly good shape (physically) and they are not going to have a lot of time to lay around because if you keep an eye on zombies, they don't need to sleep or eat or rest or anything like that. So she would have a fairly athletic build. So I went through and found the athletic build for the body. Um Guild Wars (the game she plays) is little less lenient on the clothing – you don't really have a lot of choice. You have one style and then you can change the color. Um and I had made her from a Northern country from a northern climate because it makes sense. The bodies would decompose less quickly, so you know you could have zombies that stuck around more. So I put her in a pale blue clothing to sort of you know go into the eh er uh fade into snow and ice. And I gave her pale hair and skin for the same reason and blue eyes for the same reason. And I went from there. I gave her a slightly strange hairstyle because I figured this was her one real way of rebelling. She had to join the family business, she didn't really have a choice in what she was wearing, we'll spike the hair a little bit – so take that mom and dad! (laughs) But I try to develop personalities and back stories and reasons for doing what they do and things like that for most of my characters.

McSherrrie takes a very detailed approach to character creation, stating that she spends a great amount of time before she even reaches the character creation screen coming up with a concept she wants to bring to life through the game. The level of detail here is noteworthy; she is not simply looking at race and class, as Seimiya considered with her character, but is noting how the skin colors, clothing, and hairstyles she selects all work to support the back story and personal history of the character she is creating. Each piece fits together like a puzzle, creating an identity and history that is separate and unique from her own.

Granted, both of these subjects mention family rebellion as a significant aspect of the stories they created and this might be something they both personally feel drawn to act out through these characters. But the separation between their own identities and those of the avatars

makes even a connection like that less significant, especially when compared to how a Self Player identifies and describes her avatar. For example, Self Player Bonwhin has this to say about her thought process while creating an avatar: “I guess I don’t really want to create a whole new person through the game, just an extension of myself.” The contrast here is almost laughable; Seimiya and McSherrrie go to great lengths to do the exact opposite of Bonwhin. One characteristic that does tie these three together is that they all spent a great deal of time creating the look of their avatars, placing great emphasis on wanting to get it “just right,” even though they may not have had a conscious preconceived idea of what that look would be.

Laura Mulvey’s landmark piece, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” building on the ideas of Jacques Lacan, assumed that female images, like the avatars used in many video games, are the direct manifestation of male fantasies. The hyper sexualized avatars, with large breasts and impossibly small waists, idealize a type of femininity that is unachievable and designed solely for male pleasure (Mulvey 1975). Many of the gamers who were looking for “just the right face” when designing an avatar might have been unconsciously drawn to a feminine ideal. As Callie said in an earlier chapter, she wanted a “pretty” face, one that was not scowling or showing other more aggressive expressions. Because embodying female power was important to many of the women I interviewed, they were willing to overlook the sexualized nature of the female images in order to embody that self-reflective power. The draw to see a powerful female avatar is greater than the need to subvert these exaggerated body types, and at the same time is a way for players to conform and fit into a standard they cannot ever reach in their offline lives. Callie freely admits that she wants to be that sexy, half dressed avatar because she is not that in real life. Because gaming is a place of escape, she should be able to play a super sexy chick simply because she wants to and not because some male game designer said

that was how she should look. This reforming of the hypersexualized female form is a distinct manifestation of post-feminism. Angela McRobbie calls this process “feminism undone” (34). She describes how younger women are more likely to embrace these sexualized ideals because they feel a sense of power and sophistication through that image. They also feel they can rise above earlier feminist critiques, like Mulvey’s, that said that sexually charged clothing and appearances were solely for the sake of men’s pleasure. This younger generation of women feel that they are still feminists because they choose to have a sexualized identity (McRobbie 35-36). Since gaming affords so much freedom and empowerment, many women players are willing to overlook or subvert cultural standards of beauty in order to create their own online and in-game identities, regardless of gamer type.

For some of the women that I talked to the attachment to their avatars had very little to do with how they looked and was more about emotional and interpersonal identification. Rae connects very deeply to her avatar as a personality that is separate but part of herself at the same time, an idealized self. Although she does not have the same kind of back story or character creation as the two previous role play examples, Rae discusses her avatar exclusively in the third person and indicates how her in-game personality differs significantly from her own:

Rae: in guild, in vent, i'm usually really quiet...

Rae: i don't make a lot of comments or talk

Regina: so you're more introverted?

Rae: ya... i think because of the class i chose and the roll (sic) i play i choose to be a more introverted player

Rae: in rl [real life] i'm loud and in charge

Rae: i'm out there and don't really care what people thing

Rae: thing = think

Rae: i guess since kirhen [character name] is more in my head i'm more protective of her

Regina: that is interesting - she's part of yourself you want to keep safe?

Rae: i think... its why i don't put her out there... people think of her a certain way

Rae: i actually use an accent on vent if i actually have to talk so its even more not me

For Rae, the character creation process is part of what it is for Seimiya and McSherrrie; there is a fair amount of conscious decision making going on for all three role play examples so far, but Rae differs in that she is creating a character that is the opposite of who she is in the offline world, and she is more protective of her character because she is part of her but not her at the same time. She feels more intimately associated with her creation than she is with her own personality and there is more on the line because the character represents her inner self. This contrasts greatly with many of the previously discussed ideas about identity online; often people discuss how the “ideal” online self is one that the user feels a great amount of freedom in using, putting on or taking off the persona at will, and behaving with little consequence to their offline life or reputation. But for Rae, that created, inner self, part of her but separate at the same time, is something she wants to protect from others who might behave in that loosely moral or questionably ethical way. She wants to keep HER safe, perhaps from some of the more disturbing or distressing events she’s dealt with in her own life. Perhaps, there is a level of control in the exposure for Rae’s alter-ego, allowing Rae to keep her in a safe place when she is unable to do that for herself.

Another Role Player, Wen, was discussed in the cyber drag chapter because she plays a male avatar. Because she was not creating a self-image, she is more willing and able to experiment with identity online, especially in terms of gender. Her choice to play a male warrior was based on a desire to avoid flirtation and potential bias against female tanks. Wen makes up brief back stories about her characters and those back stories inform how she acts online while she plays those characters. She talks about her male warrior, Thron, being kind of shy and unable to flirt with women because he is just a “farm boy” and is not accustomed to more independent, “city” women. She also discusses how her character Wen was designed for PvP play and how that affects how she interacts with other players. Wen’s personality is powerful and dismissive, knowing that she is a “catch” and making male toons (and presumably male players) work to keep up with her, often disappearing from sight once she is “hit on.” She discusses how Wen fell in love:

Wen: It seems to be kind of an accepted thing, especially in an RP setting, that a female RPer is looking for that RP wedding

Regina: ah ha - I hadn't considered that

Wen: And woe betide the chatty girl who is friendly.

Wen: Like me.

Wen: I mean, as you can see, I can talk the ears off anyone

Regina: It's a good thing in my book

Wen: All the fellas in the Accord [her guild] were certain that Wen was SO in love with them, even if she had only said a few passign lines

Wen: *passing

Wen: Poor desperate critters

Regina: So sad

Wen: Actually, though, Wen met a fellow at an RP wedding

Wen: We were whispering back and forth about how RP weddings are kinda creepy and weird

Wen: Especially when they seem to be taken so seriously

Wen: He has a RL wife, and I have my RL hubby, but his toon and Wen have developed a relationship

Even though Wen's talkative personality tends to show through her role play personas, that does not impact her ability to create a separate identity while she games. Each one of her online characters is different, with a different back story and a different way of interacting with other players. Wen is unique in that the characters that she creates often relate back to the class of character she plays; of particular interest is the character Wen, the female character she created to play PvP. It is important to note here that I allowed the participants to select their own names to be used in this research, as a means of identifying themselves after the chapters were written. I told them game names were fine, but they needed to be names that could not be linked to their offline identity. Wen selected one of her character names to use for the interview, hence the difference between the player Wen that I was talking to and the character of Wen that she discusses in her interview. She wanted a young looking, female toon so that the male players she beat would know they had been beaten by a "little girl." This is completely different from the persona of Thron, the male warrior she first played with, and her enjoyment of the different kinds of play that emerged from each character is clear while she talks about them. She is almost bashful here as she discusses Wen falling in love, and developing a relationship with another player while at the same time she maintains the distinction between her own identity and that of

her avatar. She has developed a friendship with another player that is based on separate characters that they both act out. Web discusses here some of the conventions around online role playing, particularly that women role players are looking for many of the same things online that they are looking for offline (the ideal wedding), another example of how offline culture maps into the game. It seems there is some social commentary here when she discusses how the desire for a role play wedding ends up coming across as rather “creepy” because Role Players often take them so seriously. She does not indicate a similar need, showing that even though she is married in her offline life that does not mean she needs to emulate the same kind of behaviors or relationships for her role playing characters. Perhaps she allows her characters a certain amount of social freedom that she does not experience in her own life.

The idea of freedom recurred throughout many of the interviews, regardless of the gamer type. The sense of movement in an environment that has been noted in earlier research about women gamers (Taylor 2006), continues to be an active trend and consideration for women players. For one Self Player, PinkGeek, an important component of gaming was becoming part of the adventure. Along with being a gamer, PinkGeek identifies herself as a fan of science fiction, often finding the female characters in science fiction to be part of what drew her to the genre in the first place. This sense permeates her gaming and other aspects of her life. As she describes gaming, she says:

I want to see me on the screen. I am, just like I said, I am completely sufficient to enter into this battle and as a woman I want to see myself doing this. That’s part of what’s so fantastic about it is that I love sci-fi movies, I love sci-fi stories but they are fairly passive and you want to be **in** that and games allow you to do that. So if I’m going to play the game I want to be the woman. I want to see myself in

the adventure. And so it's putting me into the story, it's allowing me to play out um the um fantasy and there [in the game] you get to do two things. I like my character to uh have a lot of my characteristics but at the same time I like to have characteristics that I wish I had. So that's a fun part about it but it also allows me to portray my alter ego which may not be my alter ego at all -- it's suppressed ego maybe, the adventurer I didn't get to be.

This is a significantly different approach than what we heard from the role play types, but is it no less detailed or personal of a response. PinkGeek desires to become part of the adventure with gaming in a way that reading or watching sci-fi movies just does not satisfy. Instead of creating a separate character, she wants to see herself, an admittedly idealized version of herself, within the game landscape. She wants the sense of participating as an adventurer where the choices she makes in-game affect the outcome and her experience, instead of reading or watching someone else make those decisions on a screen or in a book. Although it plays out in a different way for each type of gamer, becoming part of the adventure – of the landscape and the interactions with the players – is a primary reason for her to game. Through the adventure comes freedom, achievement, and an escape from an offline world where many people, women especially, feel limited by their choices and the opportunities open to them.

This is another theme that PinkGeek mentions during her interview; as they grow up, many women are not encouraged to be adventurous and are instead encouraged to become mothers or fill other domestic roles. Gaming, like science fiction, opens up the opportunities for a different kind of life:

I think that women just as much as men want to be a part of some kind of adventure. They want to be part of some sort of heroic event. And I think all

women are like that but I think that so often women are immediately steered into “your adventure is motherhood.” And it happens so early that I think it is confusing why there is a drive for adventure in women. But when I read science fiction and I think about those types of female warrior roles, I get excited, I get energized and I think, “I wanna play that kind of role” and I just don’t think that’s portrayed as an option for women when they are young. That, “You can be part of a hero team, you can be part of an adventure.”

For PinkGeek, and many of the other gamers – not just Self Players – becoming part of that adventure is an important part of gaming. Along with participating in the adventure and action provided by the game is the fact that achievement and recognition are leveled out in a way many women do not experience in their offline lives. In the United States, where all of the participants in this research study reside, women still make 77 cents to the dollar compared to men in equal positions with equal education and experience and many of the “domestic jobs” women do (housework, motherhood, etc.) are not paid positions. The Institute for Women’s Policy Research published a fact sheet in September of 2010 looking at the progress of women’s wages over the last fifty years. The news is not good:

Progress in closing the gender earnings gap has slowed considerably since the early 1990s . . . While the gender earnings ratio for full-time employees increased by 12.9 percentage points from 1980 to 1993, it grew by only 3.1 percentage points over the next 16 years. For full-time, full-year workers, the figure increased by 11.3 percentage points during the first period and by only 5.5 percentage points in the second period. (IWPR #C350 Sept. 2010)

Wages only represent part of the equal recognition issue for women in the workplace. Persistent glass ceilings are present for many women who work in corporate America, the academy, and politics, where certain levels of success are accepted for women but often not beyond a specific level of power and influence.

This changes in game; with game mastery, the gender divide disappears, the achievements become equal, and the gender of the player does not matter to the other gamers because the gamer's skill has already been demonstrated. Each player starts at level one and builds from there in a utopian manner, being able to explore and achieve in a way not open to women in a patriarchal society that still values male contributions over female contributions. Each of the gamer types discovered in this research showed this tendency toward achievement as a primary draw toward gaming, but the group that focused the most on it was the Neutral Players. Because their focus is on the game itself, it is a primary consideration for them in every aspect of the game.

Neutral Players are the most elusive of the three groups and were the most difficult for me to quantify while coding the research. Their approach is quite different from the Self and Role Players because their focus is different. They are not interested in-game achievements as extensions of themselves but rather as a means of gaining mastery over the game. I realized after reading through the interview transcripts that one of the identifying characteristics of Neutral Players is that when I asked them to describe their process in selecting an avatar, the first thing a Neutral Player discussed is race and class. As you can see from the transcripts of the Role Players, they would select race and class based on the story they were creating as the type of abilities the character had directly influenced the story they generated for that character. For Neutral Players, talking about race and class is talking about the most important component in

the game: how they play and how they get the best gaming experience. For example, Sarafena mentions how female avatars fit through doorways while mounted, as well as focusing on the abilities granted by each race:

Sarafena: I picked trolls because back way in the day, each class that could be a priest not only had their racial, but they had a priest racial (dwarves were the only ones with fear ward for example) and the trolls was a shadow orb. worked a lot like the shamans lightning shield, but it was bigger and purple, so i picked the troll because of that...THEN 3.0 came out and it all went down the drain :-(She will always be a troll though, because come on, the mohawk is awesome!! With my paladin, I unfortunately didn't have a choice. Since horde can only be blood elves. It'd pretty typical of a girl that plays horde to have almost nothing but blood elves, but as much as I hate to admit it, they definately [sic] look the coolest.

Sarafena: it's always been important for me to play girl characters though, no matter what race I play i'll always be a girl. its both because that's who i am, and they have smaller frames, they fit though doors on mounts.

There is a small amount of self-identification for Sarafena when she notes that she plays female characters because that is who she is in her offline life, but she backs up that reason with a game mechanics description. When I asked her if she ever played male avatars she said she tried but they “die out after level 10 or so....it just feels weird.” So she recognizes and sees herself in the avatar to a small degree, but she gives significantly more focus to and discussion about the race, class, and the inherent abilities of the avatar she chooses. Sarafena gives just as much detail about her character selection as the Role Players gave but with a significantly different focus; where the Role Players where concerned with creating a story, Sarafena is concerned with

getting the best in-game benefits from the race and class she chooses to play, going so far as considering the special effects some of the spells have and how they look (“but it was bigger and purple”). Sarafena’s affection for her avatar’s mohawk demonstrates a way that she fights against the hypersexuality and beauty ideals often seen with female avatars. Although she does not go out of her way to say this hairstyle is less attractive, it is certainly not as culturally accepted as a ponytail might be and fights against the idea of all gamers needing their avatars to be pretty.

Another Neutral Player, Jayknee, mentions only briefly the class she plays and does not give a lot of detailed information about any of her avatar design choices. She says she plays mages because she is “not nimble fingered enough for melee.” The animations are important to Jayknee as well, noting that she does not like many of the Horde races because of the way they walk. She also finds humor in some of the animations, particularly that of the male Blood Elf dying (throwing up his hands in an overly dramatic fashion). The closest she comes to a self-description is adding in that there must be “purple” involved in every character she creates, and that she has a streak of purple in her own hair. Jayknee is unique to my research in that she is the oldest participant that I interviewed. At 59, she is well out of what many consider an “acceptable” or stereotypical gaming age. She discusses that part of her motivation to game is that her sons have graduated high school and left for college, leaving her more time on her own and that gaming is more engaging than watching television. I think part of the neutrality in her responses to the interview is influenced by her age; many of the Self Players are younger and fall in more traditional age ranges for gamers, between early 20’s and early 30’s. Many of these gamers are likely to still be working out their identities in many ways, but this is not the case for Jayknee. She already has significantly more life experience and so gaming for her is more of an

escape from the “empty nest” than a place to practice or try out different skill sets. Carrying over the purple streak in her hair to her avatar could easily tie to earlier means of identity creation, having possibly experimented with the punk movements popular when she was younger, and is a means of staying youthful while engaging in a culture that is often biased toward younger participants. Makea, 50, experiences many of the same things Jayknee discusses in her interview. Both tend to be more careful identifying themselves outside of actual gaming circles as gamers because, as Makea describes, many people her own age do not understand gaming or understand why someone might want to spend their time gaming. Jayknee also points out that perhaps her age sets her apart from many younger gamers because she has so many other ways to identify herself and gaming has not impacted her life the way it might for younger gamers. Neither Makea nor Jayknee could point out skills that mapped from their game experiences into their offline lives, a significant difference from many of the Self Players interviewed.

The idea of gaining skills in-game that transfer into offline life seems to correlate more directly to the Self Players. In the example of Zoe, a Self Player mentioned briefly in the cyber drag chapter, finding and discovering new social skills is very much something that gaming has provided to her. Just like the members of The Knights of Good, Zoe discovered a lot about herself through the choices and social freedom allowed her in MMOs:

Playing MMOs was a "safe" way for me to hone my grasp on social interactions because if I screwed up, I never had to see that person in real life. I could just never chat with them again or transfer to a new guild. I'm not saying that video games made a social recluse into a charming people person or that I had no social skills before discovering video games, but I will say that video games help

reinforce awareness of the patterns people use to react to one another. Video games that allow more than one solution to a problem have also helped me become a better problem-solver in real life. I think finding new ways to approach a dilemma in-game have made it easier for me to find new approaches to problems in reality.

This is very much the same process that the members of *The Guild* go through as each season of the series progresses, slowly learning and applying the lessons of the game to “reality,” as Zoe calls it. For Self gamers, the identification with their avatars provides them this kind of space to test different outcomes, different responses, and the means of problem solving. Although some Role Players might enjoy the same benefits from creating a separate identity in-game, achieving that kind of personal growth seems to relate directly to the Self gamers who identify so strongly with their avatars. This does not make the reasons or motivations of the other groups to play less important, just different. Many of the negative stereotypes surrounding gaming and gamers stem from the characteristics of Self Players; those people who find this kind of growth and success in-game are often portrayed as “damaged goods” because they are seen as lacking skills to cope with what is really important: the physical world. As Zoe describes, games have given her a chance to “test out” or explore the ways people interact in a safe environment where the stakes are lowered (and not completely nonexistent but the consequences of “misfiring” are reduced to a simple /ignore command which does not translate into offline life particularly well). Online and offline life are inherently connected to each other, whether it is Self Players acting out their own identities online, Role Players making new and different identities, or Neutral Players taking pleasure in mastering the game itself. This ties back to Jayknee who, because she is clearly older than “the norm” for many digital RPG gamers, is engaging in youth culture in a “safe” way; she

is able to master the game and the environment in a place where her age does not matter but the focus is more on the abilities she has as a gamer regardless of age or gender.

These categories fight many of the stereotypes of the sad, lonely, socially inept, and almost exclusively male, gamer who is removed from the greater aspects of society (the physical world) and who games solely as a means of escape. These are the gamers often portrayed in popular media stories as the parents who neglect their children to some extreme end, or young adults who take their gaming so seriously they fail to graduate from high school. Although escapism is part of what draws many people to play video games, the gamer type profiles I discovered through my research fight that stereotype and demonstrate that the desire to game is as complex and unique as the gamers themselves.

Escape was not the primary motivation to play for almost all of the women I talked to throughout my research. They found social power, agency, and freedom in gaming to create a new identity, to test out their own, or to master the game in a space where achievement is equal, where gender does not impact how experience points are awarded. Sure, as Cyd says in *The Guild*, “Life is so much easier when it’s measured in experience points,” but that experience was limiting until she crossed into the physical world with it, taking her guildmates along with her on a journey of self-discovery. It was only when she started spending time in person with her guild, and creating what her therapist called a “genuine social network,” that she really found confidence in herself and her abilities.

At the end of season three, Cyd is forced to acknowledge the break between herself and her avatar during a battle to save the guild from being disbanded. Cyd’s guild has challenged an opposing guild to a winner-take-all battle royale, and the grand melee comes down to just Cyd and the rival guild leader, Fawkes. However, her character, Codex, is a healer, a class known for

protecting and keeping other players alive rather than individual battle prowess. *The Guild* is convinced the competition is over for them, and that the rival guild will win, which will mean the end of Cyd's guild and her only form of social support. The pressure seems to be too much for the real but often indecisive Cyd to handle. At this moment of ultimate stress, Cyd breaks from reality and has a conversation with her avatar, Codex, who explains to her that she needs to stop playing like herself and instead play as if she is Codex. Her online persona chastises her inept playing by saying, "I am who you are *in-game*. Who you *want* to be. Confident, in charge, naturally wavy hair . . . You're playing me like I'm Cyd: twitchy, self-conscious, with the occasional cycling pimple!" It is only after Cyd acknowledges the break between her own identity and Codex that she is able to go back into the game, heal herself, and take down her opponent. It is recognizing that she is *not* Codex that allows her to perform and play as if she is and ultimately what makes her victory possible, breaking through the fantasy that appeared to have taken over her life up until this point as evidenced not only by her inability to stop playing the game, but also by her tendency to conflate her own identity with that of her avatar. It is this combination of her online and offline life that allows Cyd to prevail and save the guild, and it beautifully demonstrates how online and offline life interact and support each other.

CONCLUSION

Transitions: Gaming goes Mainstream

Look around you: we are parents, we are grandparents, we are sons, we are daughters. We are professionals, we are students. We are geeks, we are nerds. We are liberals, we are conservatives. We are Christians, we are Jews, we are Muslims, we are atheists. We are Trekkies, we are Brown Coats. [Cheer/applause.] Apparently, a lot of us are Brown Coats. [Applause again.] We are Nintendo fanboys, we are Xbox fanboys, we are Sony fanboys. We are wannabe rock stars, we are wannabe race car drivers. But this weekend, all that matters is that we are gamers, and there are 30,000 of us here which makes it hard to believe that we are an antisocial group of maladjusted misfits. [Cheer.] So if you happen to come across someone who thinks we are, invite them to play a game with you, just try not to be a dick when you own them.

~ Wil Wheaton, PAX 2007 Keynote Address

Through the process of writing this dissertation, my research explored many aspects of game culture, focusing on how people, specifically women, engage with digital role playing games. I started out with really broad questions, the kind intended to bring about a myriad of experiences and I was not disappointed. Responses to “How do you define a gamer?” and “What does it mean to be a gamer?” were unique to each participant, with several themes that emerged throughout the responses.

One of the central themes was participating in gaming culture, not in-game culture, but gaming culture as a broader consideration; how and why games and gaming fit (or don't) into popular culture and what that means for a woman who considers herself a gamer. Along with the time devoted to gaming (often directly reflecting how much time the participant spends gaming)

and gaming as a top hobby or interest, the participants most often claimed engaging in game culture as an important component to being a gamer, citing web comics like *Penny Arcade* or *Red versus Blue*, and *The Guild* webseries as examples of this phenomenon.

This, naturally, got me thinking about what it means to participate in game culture. It is one thing to call yourself a gamer, and hide in your home, safe with your computer or your console, and play. Even, as can be witnessed in *The Guild*, if you play online with other living people, you can still lead a life separate from the culture that surrounds gaming and may often have to step out of a socially isolated comfort zone to engage interpersonally. Being a gamer may be part of how you define yourself or your own identity, but it is something different when you take the step past your own solitary experience, and place yourself *within* gaming culture.

Culture is the one constant that manifests itself in each chapter of this dissertation. In the chapter discussing cyber-drag, the idea of how gender impacts in-game culture is discussed, witnessing how offline or out of game stereotypes map onto gaming interactions between players. These gender based assumptions are no less important in game culture than they are in mainstream culture as many women players continue to fight for respect within a male dominated culture. As already noted in the methods chapter, using internet technology to recruit and conduct this research was possible because the culture of gaming allowed for participants to be comfortable and technologically prepared to be interviewed via Skype or instant messaging systems. Voice and text chatting technologies are available in most games and are key components of how gaming technologies have advanced and changed over the last decade. Each gamer type I describe in chapter four engages in a separate part of the broader gaming culture unique to their wants, desires, and motivations to play. Role playing is a distinct subculture within RPG games, and the fact that MMORPGs like World of Warcraft have servers dedicated

to role playing culture is evidence of that trend. Even though role playing is not performed by all players on these servers, as Wen discussed in her interview, the existence and maintenance of these subculture specific servers demonstrates its role in game culture. Self and Neutral players create communities based on their own interests, either to engage socially within the game or to focus on skill and mastery.

This distinction between gaming by itself and the process of organizing one's social life around interactions with other gamers, coupled with the emphasis in each chapter on game culture leads me to my concluding insight: gaming is no longer a subculture. As I will demonstrate, concepts and ideas from gaming have become part of mainstream or common U.S. culture. Because my participants are exclusively from the United States, it is this society that I address throughout this argument. Examples of how gaming ideas manifest in other forms of popular culture (movies and television), how gaming language and lexicons have crossed over into regular parlance, and how gaming technology has changed in order to better serve more diverse player populations, are all part of what I will examine here. Each of these examples engages a different part of what many consider the realm of popular culture, and each one has been directly impacted by gaming culture.

“An antisocial group of maladjusted misfits”

The stereotypical image of a gamer has long been the solitary, socially inept white male living in his mother's basement. Unable or unwilling to engage in “real” life, he seeks solace in an imaginary world, a digital utopia where he is a powerful hero. It is likely this stereotype emerged from early movies concerning games, like the 1983 movie *War Games* that depicts a young, white, male who hacks his way into a government super computer that happens to have

logic games, like chess and Tic-Tac-Toe, thinking it belongs to a local computer game company. All throughout the movies of the 1980s, male characters who were depicted as socially inept were also likely to have an interest in computers and were looked at with disdain because this “hobby” was simply a means of distracting themselves from more important, socially accepted activities. In *Weird Science* (1985), two nerdy boys from white, socially affluent families create the perfect girlfriend powered by a Barbie and a home computer terminal. *Real Genius* (1985) shows two impossibly young men (a college freshman and senior) working together to create a laser for the defense department under the guise of a college competition. The original *Tron* (1982) also shows two young male protagonists creating an immersive game that ended up literally taking over their lives. The repetition of this image of young, socially inept guys without girlfriends led to many of the negative connotations associated with being a gamer or having an interest in computers at all.

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact origin of this stereotype, it is easy to see why it lingers in the public mind. Popular news media maintain and reify this image, with television and print news sources’ reports about games focusing almost solely on cases of extreme gamers, people who eschew their outside lives in order to live in the fantasy, embracing the simulacrum or “virtual reality” over their “real” or physical lives (Baudrillard 1983). Few news sources ever report on the potentially positive aspects of gaming and gaming culture, or how it has evolved over time. It follows that the image of the “antisocial group of maladjusted misfits,” Wil Wheaton so aptly describes in his keynote address to PAX (Penny Arcade Expo) in 2007, continues to linger in the popular mindset even while events like PAX, a convention dedicated to all forms of gaming, continue to grow. He mentioned 30,000 attendees in this keynote address from the second annual event, but PAX Prime in 2010 saw more than 67,000 attendees, more

than doubling the attendance in three years. The interest in PAX expanded so much it now has two conferences: PAX Prime, which is held in Seattle, WA, where the original event took place, and PAX East in Boston, MA.

Even with this kind of growth and popularity, the stereotype is so pervasive that many hesitate to call themselves gamers because of the negative associations with the culture, mainly because it is often a means of definition away from the “norm.” This is not the case with my research participants since they are self-identified as gamers and answered the invitation to participate in my research because of that very title. In many casual conversations, people (women and men) I talk to are resistant to call themselves gamers even if they spend many hours a day playing Farmville, Restaurant City, Angry Birds, or any of the other abundant examples of gaming that are omnipresent on social networking sites and are available for free on many cell phones. Because they are not playing on a console or engaging in an MMO, nor are they socially maladapted guys, they do not consider themselves “gamers.” The time they dedicate to gaming speaks otherwise. Bejeweled Blitz is one of the most popular games on Facebook. An abstract, arcade style game that is limited to one minute rounds, average play time a day is 45 minutes (PopCap interview on C-Net). The same time investment is true for another popular social game, Farmville, where dedicated players invest hours a day, and often cold hard cash, in order to keep up with the continuing onslaught of new and improved game features.

These games can be played free through the Facebook platform, and have an additional social level in that players are engaging their friends either competitively (in Bejeweled Blitz in order to have the top score for the week) or collaboratively (in Farmville by sending items/gifts to each other and performing other helpful activities like fertilizing each other’s crops). They are also an effective introduction to gaming; PopCap, the makers of Bejeweled Blitz, often offer

discounts and other incentives to buy their other games through the demos available on social networking sites, namely for the full version of Bejeweled or Plants vs. Zombies, which was recently named game of the year,.

These “free” games can often act as a gateway into more sophisticated gaming, allowing players who feel they are more “casual” or “social” to begin to get a sense for gaming and possibly move on to more dedicated gaming activities. This is one way that gaming culture has crossed over into mainstream culture; the Nielsen group did a study in 2010 investigating where and how the U.S. population was spending its time online. The two largest categories of time spent were online social networking (22.7%) and games (10.2%) (Neilson 2010). This marks a clear change in how people spend their time online, in contrast to just a few years ago when the vast majority of online time was spent sending and receiving email and browsing websites (PEW internet usage study - 2005).

Gaming on social networking sites is only one way that gaming has become part of mainstream culture. In the last few years, many movies have been made based directly on video game storylines, and although many gamers would argue that the movies fall short compared to the games themselves, this alone shows the crossover of video game culture into mainstream media. *Resident Evil I-IV*, *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, *Doom*, and *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*, are just a few examples of movies made directly from video game characters and plots. But looking past the obvious connection between movies made about and from game stories and plots, it is more significant to look at the ideas behind gaming that have evolved into many popular movie plots. Three standout examples within the last two years are the movies *Gamer*, *Avatar*, and *Surrogates*. Each of these movie plots are based on the idea of a corporeal being (human) taking on another physical body (avatar) in order to experience his or her life. In

Gamer, the connection to video games is clear; the “players” of the game control living human beings, engaging them in dangerous situations where they can vicariously experience those situations with no harm coming to their own bodies. *Surrogates* explores the same kind of storyline where privileged people are able to completely take over another robotic body and then live out their own lives from the comfort of their beds, having their every waking experience take place in a body separate from their own. In *Avatar*, an injured or “broken” human, paralyzed from the waist down, is able to take on an alien body and live a physical life he would be incapable of on his own, and his “second” life in the alien body and culture becomes central to his sense of identity and self.

Each of these movies explores a very common video game concept: learning through experience. When a character or player “dies” in a video game, s/he is able to go back into the game and start over again, moving forward with the knowledge from his or her previous experience with the game. The player learns where and how to jump/fight/dodge; in essence, how to overcome the obstacles that are provided by the game, and each failure leads to another greater success (as long as the player does not quit or abandon the game.) An earlier movie example of this would be *Groundhog Day*, where Bill Murray’s character lives the same day over and over again until he learns the “right” way, personally engaging with the small town community and falling in love for the first time. In each “day,” he takes with him the knowledge of the previous day and is able to act on that knowledge, an experience unique to his character throughout the film. Although many have made the argument that *Groundhog Day* is a story personifying many Buddhist ideals, it is just as much a story of how the ideas and concepts afforded through gaming have infiltrated mainstream culture. A German film, *Run Lola Run*, also builds its main premise on video game concepts and is similar in structure to *Groundhog*

Day. As Lola struggles to save her boyfriend's life, she is subjected to three separate experiences of the same twenty minute time frame. As the first two rounds end in tragedy and theft, she takes with her the knowledge and ability to master the last round, save herself and her boyfriend, and win 100,000 francs.

With the exceptions of *Groundhog Day* and *Run Lola Run*, many of the movies where video game concepts have emerged are based in the realm of Science Fiction. This remains true as we look at some of the television shows that manifest these same concepts. The second incarnation of *Battlestar Galactica* (BSG) in 2003, which remains one of the most popular sci-fi shows of all time, pits the last living human beings against a race of human looking clones called the Cylons. Robots that were invented and once controlled by humans, the Cylons become self-aware and eventually declare war on the humans. There are only thirteen human-looking models of Cylons, and each is able to download the experience of the others through a gigantic mainframe called the Resurrection Ship. This allows the entire race to share experience and knowledge, regardless of whether the physical Cylon body lives, and each consciousness to eventually be reborn to a new, identical body after dying. The technology developed by the Cylons gives them many advantages over the humans they wish to conquer, but with that technological advancement also comes arrogance, and it is through that arrogance that the humans eventually outwit the Cylons, demonstrating that human ingenuity and individuality is of the utmost importance.

The human and Cylon interactions mirror another aspect of game play. As artificially created beings, originally robots meant to help and assist human populations, the Cylons very much resemble the characters or adversaries created throughout video game programming. Rarely does a gamer consider the personal history and life experience of a Kobold (a small,

reptile-like creature often featured in fantasy based games as a low level challenge) before pulling out his or her best spell or weapon to dispatch them. At the beginning of the series, the Cylons of BSG are treated in much the same way. Seen as not human, and because the knowledge they possess can be passed on directly to the other Cylons, they are killed without remorse or punishment and often their deaths are celebrated as great triumphs. Throughout the entirety of the series, the Cylons develop as characters, taking on more human characteristics and winning over some human allies. The human characteristics the Cylons consider weak, specifically empathy and deep emotion, end up being the things that help several of them transcend the limited experience provided to them by the ability to resurrect, and it is only at this point that the series can find ultimate resolution and the game of survival, for both races, can end.

A theme that runs through each of these examples of video game concepts and ideas that have manifested in popular movie and television culture is a fear of technology. In each of these examples, the technology being used has brought about terrible consequences for human life; in *Gamer*, humans are easily and readily sacrificed for the sake of entertainment. In *Surrogates*, women's bodies are sexually abused and mistreated and all "real" (i.e. physical) life is considered less important than the surrogate lifestyle, where no one ever ages because new bodies are always available. Fear of technology infuses the basic plot line of *Avatar* in the idea that technologically advanced societies are ready and willing to sacrifice physical resources in order to advance technologically. The fear present within BSG is that the Cylons so closely resemble humans that true individuality, a concept paramount to many human belief systems, is called into question. Each movie asks, what does it mean to be human in a world where technology is continually advancing?

As many computer users experienced early on, personal computers can be a bastion of productivity and distraction. While many people in modern, first world societies work at a computer screen, many also find relaxation in much the same environment. Many more casual gamers had their first experiences gaming with preloaded PC games like Solitaire, Mine Sweeper, and Chess. Instead of taking a break away from the computer to go for a walk, or even heading down to the local arcade to play Ms. Pac-Man, computer users would simply open up and play the games already installed on their machines. At first, these games were played only on a single machine, meaning that a user's top score would be stored in that place alone and to "beat" that top score, a player would have to use the same computer. As mentioned above, social media sites and cell phone technologies that have advanced to include gaming and web service allow these games to foster a more social connection. Even if a player is in the airport playing on her phone, she can still upload her high score to the web and see how she ranks against not just her friends but a huge network of people playing the same game. With the invention of networking in all its many forms, games have surpassed solitary confinement and morphed into shared activities in the common culture. So "break time" that was once solitary becomes more socially interactive, and moves towards more ready social acceptance.

However, as a new form of entertainment, it is no surprise that video games and the concepts inherent within this technology scare people and that the mass media focuses on extreme cases of addiction or other forms of unhealthy engagement. It is easy and even expected to fear the unknown; there was a time when a revolutionary literary idea – mass publication of novels – scared people and was considered dangerous and hopefully, a passing fancy or trend that would not endure the test of time (Mayra 65). More than 100 years later, there are more novels published now than ever before and no one has been harmed by that revolution. This

trend of reading novels was seen as particularly dangerous for women of the late 1800s because it was a place where they learned of independence and free thinking, and it had the potential to empower them to think of themselves as having an identity outside of the family structure. By removing herself from the private sphere of the home, the place where “civilized” society said she should have her only power, the female reader wandered into the realm of men, the public (Aliaga-Buchebau chapter 5). It was feared at the time that women would understand and embrace their sexuality, and sexual power, through reading romantic novels with powerful and sometimes adulterous heroines, such as *Madam Bovary*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park*, and *Northanger Abbey*, to name just a few.

This is significant to women gamers because of the way these same ideas about women’s power manifest in modern times. For many women, their individual identities are tied up with the empowerment that supposedly comes from shopping and spending money. The driving idea behind Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* is how women desire to be sexual objects, primarily objects of men’s pleasure. The way to achieve this power is through material purchases and constantly spending more money in order to attempt to achieve an unreachable ideal (Wolf 143-144). A female gamer removes herself from that capitalist arena by finding personal empowerment through gaming. It also means women are avoiding one of the primary pulls towards consumer culture: television advertisements. Gaming often takes the place of more passive forms of visual entertainment, and although there is a fair amount of product placement and ads within many games, the continued onslaught of commercials urging consumers to spend is avoided. This seems to be especially true in many of the Kinect games that Microsoft offers, especially Kinect Sports, where the bowling balls have company logos and colors. Since the

Kinect is intended to pull in more “casual” gamers, it is no surprise that product placement is heightened.

Perhaps women gamers are threatening because gaming culture often runs counter to consumer cultures. This could be why news sources and even scholarly works are resistant to considering women as part of the expanding gaming culture. Yes, playing a game often requires a significant financial output; individual gaming consoles like the Wii or the Xbox 360 can run anywhere from \$200 to \$400, and personal computers modified for gaming can cost even more. Games themselves can cost anywhere from \$30 to \$50 for the basic software needed to play, and many MMOs require monthly subscription charges. But once a player invests that initial cost, she is provided hours of entertainment, hours where she is not out shopping, watching television, or engaging in other consumer driven enterprises. One of my participants, PinkGeek, explained that she preferred gaming to other forms of entertainment, like going out to the movies, because she got a lot of “bang for [her] buck.” Games offer replayability, or continued amusement, whereas going to the movies is a one time event that often involves shelling out a fair amount of money for the tickets and any peripherals like food concessions.

In my own experience I have been guilty of using shopping as a means of therapy; I feel bad or stressed out about some aspect of my life, so I go out and buy a new pair of totally unneeded shoes or a new sweater and then I feel better. Gaming is a much more satisfying outlet, where I can take those frustrations and move forward with a character of my own design and engage in adventure in a way that I could not find available to me at the mall. It makes sense that popular news media would focus not only on male gamers as the standard stereotype, but also shy away from talking about the potential positives of gaming for men and women. They

still need to sell newspapers or web advertisements, so they need people to be willing to spend that money in order to gain fulfillment.

This idea is constantly reified by popular culture, especially in shows like *Sex and the City* where feminine power is manifested through shopping and sexual attractiveness. The initial threat posed by novels has not left either, since popular book series like the *Shopaholic Series*, by Sophie Kinsella, continue to connect women's empowerment to shopping. The modern concept of identity formation often focuses on how people construct their identities through their clothing and other items they purchase (Slater 1997). Although this construction is by no means limited to women alone, it has a different focus for women. Women are expected to enjoy shopping, experiencing excessive consumption as a means of realizing individuation (Bauman 2000). Men not only are allowed to dislike and avoid shopping but they are less likely to be encouraged to find their identity through the construction of their clothing and instead are to focus on their jobs or careers as the main means of expressing their empowerment. So not only is gaming dangerous because it helps women to feel empowered and so less likely to shop for fulfillment and even less likely to be exposed to the advertisements intended to get them to readily consume, it is also dangerous because it might do the same for men, driving them away from consumer culture.

Even though my research focused on female gamers, the character of Vork in *The Guild* clearly represents a male gamer who actively dismisses many of the practices of consumer culture. He reads expiration dates on canned food as "suggestions," and brings his own cheese and soda to the restaurant where the group meets, much to the embarrassment and discomfort of his guildmates. Vork's character exaggerates this idea of anti-consumerism to the point of humor, but his actions serve as an excellent metaphor for the break between gaming and

consumer culture. For Vork, gaming represents not only a cost effective means of entertainment but also a place where he can wield a great deal of power as the leader of this group of players. Although he is mocked by one of the guild members, Tink, as having far too many rules, Vork takes his responsibilities seriously, keeping detailed records of the guild raids and rulebooks. In season three, when he feels he has failed as a leader for the group, he hands over the mantle of guild leader to Codex and goes on a journey of self-discovery with every intention of discovering what makes him a good leader. He finds that people find him repulsive and difficult to get along with and this is what gives him such great leadership skills. It is worth noting that Vork's personal quest is sponsored by as many free Wi-fi connections as he can find, many of which are in humorous locations like the drive through window at the local burger joint and in other people's driveways. Ultimately, Vork's journey costs him \$13 in gas but the insight into himself and his leadership skills was worth every penny.

Gamer Lingo goes Mainstream

The modification and creation of new languages with specific contextual lexicons is a primary means of defining a subculture. Because subcultures generally seek to define themselves against mainstream or mass culture, creating a lexicon that alienates those outside the culture is a primary means of achieving that status (Hebdige 396). In order to demonstrate credibility and active participation in any subculture, a person participating must understand that language. This is the case with many subcultures, and gaming is no different. The word "elite" was used in the 1980's by the computer savvy community to indicate a person's high level of computer knowledge. Many early computer systems incorporated simple text filters to prevent certain words from being used. In attempts to defeat such text filters, computer savvy users

would substitute numbers and letters that resembled an intended character in either look or sound, such as substituting z for “s,” the numeral 1 for lower case “l,” or 7 for capital “T.” This practice grew to be known as “1337 sp34k”, or “Leet Speak.” Leet Speak has grown into an alternative alphabet and symbolic language used to mark people involved in gaming and Internet culture (“Leet” Wikipedia Web). In gaming terms, referring to something as “1337” indicates its elite status among its peers, either in terms of gear or experience; for example, “That new helm you got is totally 1337!” Thus, gaming’s own lexicon was born.

Leet Speak was also adapted by gamers because gamer tags (the names gamers are known by in-game and online) often had a limited number of characters available, or the gamer’s preferred name was already taken. Leet Speak allowed players to generate many different forms of the same name. For example, my World of Warcraft alias is “Sunnybee.” If I were to go into another game and that name was already taken I could use Leet and spell it “Zunnyb33” and the meaning would remain the same. The name Leet Speak plays not only on the acknowledgment that to be the “best” player one must be an Elite or top level gamer, but also that to understand the language you must have a deep understanding of and experience with the culture itself. Although Leet follows the basic grammatical foundations of English, it is particularly difficult to understand because there are so many different ways to modify and change the same words. Within the language, each of the 26 letters in the Roman alphabet has multiple incarnations where different letters, numbers, and symbols can be used in any order within the lexicon. This not only shows the diversity of the language but also shows a creative tendency with language present in many cultures and subcultures. Leet differs from the more widely known and recognized texting languages in that its focus is not on making messages shorter (for example, substituting “u” for “you” in texting) but rather on demonstrating creativity and play with

language. Understanding the language of Leet manifests one of the great qualities seen in gaming skill itself – an ability to quickly recognize and differentiate multiple meanings.

Although Leet itself is still fairly erudite in its usage and general understanding, the flexibility and play with language within digital gaming has crossed over into mainstream or common culture, allowing some broad terms to be used in newspapers and online. Recently, Lake Superior State University published a list of words they determined should be banished because of their overuse (Lake Superior State U web). On the list were two examples of words that have their origins in game culture. The popular use of “FAIL” as a means of identifying things that are wrong or confusing has its basis in a popular Japanese game from 1998. Blazing Star was known for its humorous use of broken or mistranslated English and when players ended the game, the narrator would say, “You are fail” (Zimmer Web). This phrase was adopted by gamers to signify the ultimate in not succeeding and within a few years of use by gamers, it emerged into popular usage symbolizing any number of failures, including the recent economic downturn. The article points out how a protester held up a sign that simply read FAIL behind Henry Paulson Jr., the former Treasury secretary, and Ben S. Bernanke, chairman of the Federal Reserve. Just the fact that the New York Times wrote an article tracing the trajectory of the word is proof that this phrase has entered mainstream culture (Zimmer Web).

The second phrase on the Lake Superior State U. list tied to gaming is “Epic.” The common overuse of epic to mean anything “better than normal” can be linked to gaming culture in terms of how top level characters and gear in MMORPGs and other complex, plot driven games are considered “Epic.” Battles won against the monster or boss bad guy at the end of many games, just as many stories of valor from history or legend, are considered “Epic” – that is to say that they are greater and more difficult than anything that has come before. “Epic” and

“FAIL” are often used in conjunction with each other; in an article in Slate magazine online, an “Epic FAIL” “involves not just catastrophic failure but hubris as well” (Slate Web). Where a simple “FAIL” might involve a mistranslation of language or someone slipping on the ice rink, an “Epic FAIL” involves premature feelings of victory or misplaced self-assurance. The author of the *Slate* piece notes that Epic Fail ties into a nation obsessed with “schadenfreude,” the pleasure in other people’s misfortune (Slate Web). Both the *Slate* and the *New York Times* articles coincide with the emergence of online massively multiplayer games into mass culture and the popular emergence of game culture.

Although many people who use these terms might not know their origin, the morphing and changing of word meanings and usage is a common means of measuring how and why a society is advancing. That gamer speak appeared on a list of “overused” words to be banished, and promoted a discussion in the *New York Times*, indicates a change in the tide of the popular acceptance and mainstreaming of gaming culture. Even though many casual players might still balk at the idea of being a “gamer” it is becoming significantly more difficult to dismiss gaming and game culture as a passing fancy.

As goes gaming, so goes technology

Game culture is emerging into the mainstream not just through gaming language and movie plots based on game stories but also through changes in game platforms themselves. The gaming industry is cognizant of the changes going on within gaming culture and has in turn modified its marketing strategies to not only keep hardcore gamers interested but also engage this ever growing pool of casual gamers. Just as the focus in social gaming is to first “hook” a player and then get her engaged in more immersive environments, the game industry has

accepted and embraced that non-traditional and cutting edge technologies are the way to gather new consumers and, of course, generate more revenue. As frightened as the U.S. culture generally might be by women gamers, since gaming threatens to take away a large number of casual consumers, the gaming industry is aware that women purchase a large percentage of the games available on the market today. In the 2004 study mentioned in a previous chapter, 30.6% of games are purchased by women consumers in the United Kingdom (Krotoski 11). The study notes that these findings do not describe whether the women who buy these games play them, but the interest in my research certainly indicates a large proportion of women gamers in the market. Many of the games marketed for “alternative” gaming platforms are aimed at women because they are seen as more casual and often more likely to be seeking family friendly games.

When the Nintendo Wii first entered the market, many game critics believed it would not succeed and had little chance for longevity, primarily because of its unique new controller design. The original Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), released in 1984, employed a rectangular controller held in a horizontal position with two hands: the left thumb manipulated a directional pad, and two action buttons were pressed by the right thumb. This format has been modified somewhat by different game consoles over the years, adding additional trigger style buttons that can be pressed by the index fingers and small joystick-like raised pads that can be used by the thumbs, but the format has largely remained the same for over 25 years. The new Wii controller literally turned gaming in its side by taking the standard two-handed horizontal controller and changing its orientation to a more vertical style usable in a single hand, much like a television remote control. It also has sophisticated electronics that detect motion in any direction as well as the speed of such movement allowing players to gesture with it, mimicking

natural actions like rolling a bowling ball, swinging a tennis racquet or baseball bat, or even boxing.

Instead of failing, the Wii revolutionized console gaming, taking what was once a passive activity and making it more active by picking up on player movements rather than the button pushing that defined the generation of consoles that came before. Wii Sports, the game that comes with the console when it is first purchased, has many multiplayer games both competitive and collaborative by design. While multiplayer games by themselves were not revolutionary, the actions and perceived performance inherent in this kind of gaming forever altered the way the game industry and the general public perceived console gaming. This is not to say that first person shooters (games like Doom, Halo, or Call of Duty, which focus on the player killing other players or bad guys in the game with the biggest weapon they can find) or other individually played games would take a backseat to this new form of interactivity, but instead it gave gamers multiple ways to engage with their favorite pastime. The Wii is still wildly popular, especially with the company's leaning toward games that are "family" friendly and their contracts with other family identified corporations like Disney and Buena Vista entertainment. CarmenGray discussed how she uses the Wii game Animal Crossing to stay connected to her nephew. The Wii network allows her to game online and chat with him at the same time so that although they are miles apart from each other, they can still "play" together. It is this kind of social activity, of social *connection* rather than *disconnection*, that demonstrates the best of what gaming has to offer. Because her nephew is a toddler, CarmenGray is lucky to have a console like the Wii that is not only family friendly but useable by young and older players.

In direct competition with the Wii is Microsoft's newest Xbox add on, the Kinect. Released in November 2010 after lengthy advertising hype, the Kinect took the gaming world by

storm. The Kinect is a device that emits thousands of pinpoints of infrared light in a particular pattern. When the player moves, a camera picks up the changes in the dispersion pattern of the reflected light and translates that into the game, allowing the player to control the game with physical gestures alone and no handheld controller. Debuting with popular interactive games like Dance Central, where the player mimics the dance moves seen in his or her favorite music videos without the controller needed with Wii games, The Kinect is clearly the next means of engaging mainstream culture into gaming. Along with games people can play with the Kinect, it also has video chat capabilities allowing users to “connect” to other friends on the Xbox live network, and acts as a motion and voice controller for the console itself. Users with the Kinect can command the Xbox with simple voice commands, such as, “Eject disk” and use their hands without controllers to scroll through the menus. This could also be a way to engage populations generally excluded from console gaming, especially those with physical disabilities. Some games also photograph while playing the game so that the user’s most awkward moments are recorded and reviewed by the audience at the end of the round.

This attempt at expanding the way people play video games is consistent with gaming transitioning out of the realm of subculture. Gaming has led the forefront of technological innovation for the last decade, with many of the traditions associated with online life and culture having evolved from gaming. Where Skype has made video chatting or voice chatting over the computer available to mass culture, online gamers have been using voice chat for years as a means to game together and interact socially at the same time. The proliferation of these technologies demonstrates exactly how pervasive gaming technologies have become. Gaming continues to evolve, as any significant contribution to society should, and the industry is aware

of the changes in the player populations even in terms of those who play first person shooters or other more traditional games.

But who are these gamers?

An advertisement for the recent sequel to the first person shooter Call of Duty, Call of Duty: Black Ops, goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the player engaged in this game is not the stereotypical white male gamer alone in his mother's basement. With the tag line, "There's A Soldier in All of Us," the commercial opens with a woman of color in a business suit and high heels walking into a war zone carrying a P-90, a military assault weapon. Set to the soundtrack of The Rolling Stones, "Gimme Shelter," the commercial shows men and women, racially and body type diverse, in a war zone, firing weapons at the unseen adversary and working together as a team. Each of the people playing is dressed in their professional garb; there is a doctor in scrubs and a white lab coat, a firefighter donning his helmet, a chef, and in the middle of the commercial, a man in a suit takes a call on his cell phone and answers, "Concierge." This commercial is clearly working under the impression that gaming culture and those who game have changed dramatically. No longer does the industry see its only demographic as male players between the ages of 18 and 25 but instead as a racially diverse and economically heterogeneous population. Attempting to make the expansion to their original hit attractive to a wide variety of players, the company takes an "everyman" approach. Regardless of your race, class, gender, or body type, there is a soldier within you and this is the game to bring it out, without the threat of actual physical injury.

The commercial has two celebrity appearances: Jimmy Kimmel and Kobe Bryant are seen carrying personalized weapons. Kimmel's bazooka sports, "Proud n00b," a status which is

directly reflected by the fact that he comically falls over when he shoots it. Bryant carries an assault rifle marked “Mamba,” his nickname. Neither Kimmel or Bryant can be seen as an “everyman” but the idea that celebrities can also be gamers marks another way that gaming culture has moved into the mainstream. Where many celebrities might once have hidden an interest in gaming, it is now ok and socially acceptable to be called a gamer and back a video game (especially, of course, if the game company is paying you for your time). Showing a sports hero clearly adept and skilled at playing calls to attention the idea that gaming is a type of sport, where many of the skills associated with physical sports are required. Kimmel clearly lacks the hand eye coordination that Bryant carries off without a hitch, demonstrating that his prowess clearly lies in sitting behind the late night interview desk and not on the battle field.

But Kimmel and Bryant are not the only celebrities actively associating themselves with gaming culture. In a video posted on the website, Funny or Die, Snoop Dogg, LL Cool J, and Zachary Levi all play a round of Halo: Reach, a highly popular multi-player first person shooter. In true outrageous celebrity fashion, instead of merely throwing slurs against each other’s game prowess, as is generally experienced in these kinds of competitive gaming environments, they instead send the USC marching band, a pizza delivery, the paparazzi, and a flatbed truck full of bikini clad women to each other’s doorsteps. Naturally trying to outplay each other, all three end up losing in the end to another celebrity: Wayne Newton. Here gaming provides a new kind of hipness, or a cool factor that might not be available to people or celebrities in different arenas. By “owning” Snoop Dogg, LL Cool J, and Levi, Newton places himself in Leet company and personifies cool.

Even though Levi’s character directly pokes fun at the stereotypical male gamer living in his mother’s basement, this video transcends the idea that gamers come in one size only. Levi not

only talks to his mother (who is apparently off screen) but is also sitting with a “basement” looking backdrop and wearing a black t-shirt with a red label NERD across the front. Levi’s own personal mission is to change the view of nerds and make it a term to be embraced rather than rejected, and he carries forward that image in this video since he is the most passive and polite of all the gamers. Although the video is meant to be humorous and poke fun at many of the social norms associated with gaming, it does a good job of representing gamers in a different light. None of the players make unnecessary insults about each others’ mothers or genitalia. Yes, they make comments about how “good it tastes” to kill each other, but in terms of anonymous online game slurs or insults, they are very mild and show a certain level of respect (except, perhaps, when Snoop Dogg tea-bags Levi’s avatar).

Perhaps they heard the call to action from a webseries aimed at game developers: *Extra Credits*, written by James Portnow. In a segment called, “Gamer,” this editorial commentary show takes on the challenge of defining the term “gamer” and what it means to be a gamer. They note how the term gamer is unique from all forms of media fandom:

Gamer itself is an odd term. It’s unique. Think about film or books. You don’t call people who watch films Filmers or Film Watchers, in the same way that you don’t call people who read Bookers or Readers. In fact none of the other mass media have an analogous term. The only time you refer to a person by the media they enjoy, outside of games, is when they have an almost pathological obsession with that media. A bibliophile or audiophile is not someone who *likes* books or music, they are someone who *fixates* on these media to the complete exclusion of other aspects of their life. (Show transcript, author’s emphasis.)

Although this is an excellent observation, the analysis is only surface deep. One of the reasons people who play games become gamers is because it is the only interactive form of

entertainment or art. People who watch movies do not become part of the movie, they do not affect the outcome. They are passive consumers – taking in the information displayed to them – and the images or story *might* impact how they see themselves or understand the world. There is no way to avoid that impact with gaming. When gamers game they are doing far more than simply observing the action, they are controlling and shaping it, especially in games that are played with other people. I think that is why gamers are *gamers* – they engage, impact, change, and are changed by games. That interaction and immersion sets gaming apart from every other form of media entertainment.

The show goes on to discuss the definition of gamer and how gamers have created a subculture specific to their own likes and dislikes, specifically taking to task that same tired stereotype that this chapter keeps returning to over and over again. But it also calls attention to the gamers themselves and suggests that they have to take their own actions into consideration while trying to change this image. Outlining four steps that gamers can take to impact and change the way they are viewed outside of gaming culture, the show calls for gamers to behave better in online forums and while gaming, to be open to the opportunity to engage people who are not gamers (much as Wil Wheaton does in this chapter’s epigraph), and demand better games from the industry. In short, the responsibility is on gamers themselves:

We will be known as “gamers” as long as gaming is seen as abnormal and so long as gaming is seen as abnormal it will carry with it the stigma that hampers games and gamers from being taken seriously. We should be proud of the fact that we are pioneers in this new medium, embracing it at its nascent stages, and so, as its evangelists and its proponents, we should act with respect and dignity and show truth to the lie that, for most, stands behind the word gamer.

Not a small undertaking for the community, but given the dedication many gamers have to their favorite form of entertainment, I have no doubt we are up to the challenge. And perhaps it is the

responsibility of women gamers to take up the gamer mantle and advocate change to the stereotype. Women have been changing and challenging stereotypes and socially constructed roles throughout history, and given the level of fulfillment afforded to the women in this study through gaming, this might just be the next game we need to play.

GLOSSARY

AOE: Area of Effect – often associated with spell casting, Area of Effect is damage caused over a specific range of distance.

Bank Character – a character that a player has in order to extend storage of in-game items.

Having a character that players can mail other items to increases the amount of bank slots available to that player without a large investment of in-game currency.

Bladezz – rogue and DPS for The Knights of Good. The resident bad boy of the guild even if his mom has to drive him to guild events.

Clara – frost mage and DPS for The Knights of Good. Mom and emotional support for the guild and sometimes her family, too.

Class – the type of character a player chooses to play. Tanks, healers, DPS, and specialization are the broadest types of class in RPGs. An effective group usually consists of one tank, one healer, and at least three DPS.

Cyd/Codex – the main character of the series, Codex is the healer for her guild, The Knights of Good, and the main force that holds the guild together.

DPS: Damage Per Second – a character class dedicated to long term damage over time and AOE. DPS are often warlocks, rangers, or hunters, and are found at the back of a group. They are similar to Tanks in that they are an attack class, but are generally not skilled in hand to hand combat.

Experience points (XP) – the way progress is measured in-game. Experience points are earned for killing monsters, completing quests, and other in-game activities. The means by which a character is “leveled.” See also “Leveling.”

Game Commands – a means of expressing emotion or physical activities within the game.

Players can mimic physical actions like hugging (/hug), kissing (/kiss), or bowing (/bow) to each other as well as block unsavory players from further interaction (/ignore).

Gifting – the act of giving another player items or money.

Gold/Platnum/Isk – in-game currency that is earned from killing and looting monsters, selling goods to other players, and selling items to the NPC stores and vendors.

Guild Bank – shared storage access for the members of a guild. Players in the same guild can share items or goods they can make in-game through the guild bank.

Guild/Kin/Supergroup – a group of players who support and help each other, especially in terms of end game raiding for high end weapons and gear, i.e. loot. The Knights of Good is the name of the fictional guild in the webseries *The Guild*. Kins (Lord of the Rings Online) and Supergroups (City of Heroes/Villians) serve the same purpose.

Healer – a character class often dedicated to maintaining the health of the other players in a group. Healers are often priests, clerics, or shaman and while they can do damage, they are more often found at the back of the action healing the tank and other DPS players.

Hit Points – the amount of attack damage a character can take. Tanks often have the most hit points of any class, made necessary by the fact that they are melee fighters.

Horde/Alliance – the two warring factions in World of Warcraft. Each faction has its own specific races and classes. The factions speak a different language, so players in opposing factions are unable to communicate verbally with each other but can use non-verbal communication commands like /wink, /hug, /dance, etc. with each other.

Leveling – a common means of measuring advancement through MMORPGs and most digital computer games. Players need to acquire a specific number of experience points (XP) in

order to reach the highest level in the game and be able to play end game content. See also “Experience Points.”

Loot/Looting – the items collected in-game from killing monsters or chests. Most elite (leet) gear comes from taking down bosses or other end-game activities.

Melee – hand to hand combat fighting classes, proficient with melee weapons like swords, daggers, etc. Melee classes contrast directly with ranged classes like hunters/rangers, or most spell casting damage classes like warlocks, mages, sorcerers, or wizards.

NPC: Non-Player Character – a character that is controlled by the game. These characters are often quest givers, innkeepers, or hold other static positions within the game structure.

PUG: Pick Up Group – a group of players who usually do not play together but fill all the roles needed for a dungeon. World of Warcraft streamlined this process with the Random Dungeon Finder that pairs players together from different realms and servers.

PvP: Player vs Player – arenas or areas of the game where players can compete against each other with the skills they usually use against the game itself. In World of Warcraft, players have the choice to play on a PvP server, where everyone is fighting against other player foes or on regular or role-play servers where players have to actively choose to either go into a PvP arena or “turn on” PvP status.

Race – the species that a player selects at the start of the character creation process. Different races often have very different physical characteristics but share basic humanoid characteristics like walking on two legs and having a head with eyes and a face. Gender stereotypes map into each race with female avatars of each being smaller in stature and overall size and often having hourglass figures.

Realm/World – the server a player selects at the start of an MMO. Player avatars are stored on the realm in which they play and each player is limited to a certain number of characters on that realm. Many players talk about the different kinds of communities that emerge on whatever realms or worlds they play and those communities are often related to the kind of realm: PvP, Regular, or Role-Play.

Spell Points/Mana/Energy – the amount of “life force” a spell caster, healer, or specialization class player has to cast spells for healing or damage. Healers and most DPS classes depend on spell points.

Tank – often a warrior or melee (hand to hand fighter) class, and is the player class that is the first line of defense in any group. Tanks have a high number of hit points and can take the most direct damage. The gender assumptions in RPG gaming often fall to male players being “tanks” and female players being “healers” or those who take care of the health of the group.

Tinkerballa (Tink) – ranger and DPS for The Knights of Good. A hardcore gamer, Tink takes her loot very seriously.

Toon – abbreviation of “cartoon” and a short name for avatar or a player’s character.

Vork – tank for The Knights of Good and guild leader. He gave up his day job in order to professionally lead the guild.

Zaboo – warlock and DPS for The Knights of Good. Loveably goofy and over the top in everything he does.

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APPENDIX A
IRB APPROVAL

MEMORANDUM

TO: CAROL SIEGEL and Elizabeth McMenemy,

FROM: Malathi Jandhyala , Office of Research Assurances (3005)

DATE: 9/16/2009

SUBJECT: Certification of Exemption, IRB Number 11036

Based on the Exemption Determination Application submitted for the study titled "Game on Girl: Women Gamers and Identity," and assigned IRB # 11036, the WSU Institutional Review Board has determined that the study satisfies the criteria for Exempt Research at 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2).

This study may be conducted according to the protocol described in the Application without further review by the IRB.

It is important to note that certification of exemption is NOT approval by the IRB. You may not include the statement that the WSU IRB has reviewed and approved the study for human subject participation. Remove all statements of IRB Approval and IRB contact information from study materials that will be disseminated to participants.

This certification is valid only for the study protocol as it was submitted to the IRB. Studies certified as Exempt are not subject to continuing review (this Certification does not expire). If any changes are made to the study protocol, you must submit the changes to the IRB for determination that the study remains Exempt before implementing the changes (The Request for

Amendment form is available online at

http://www.irb.wsu.edu/documents/forms/rtf/Amendment_Request.rtf).

Exempt certification does NOT relieve the investigator from the responsibility of providing continuing attention to protection of human subjects participating in the study and adherence to ethical standards for research involving human participants.

In accordance with WSU Business Policies and Procedures Manual (BPPM), this Certification of Exemption, a copy of the Exemption Determination Application identified by this certification and all materials related to data collection, analysis or reporting must be retained by the Principal Investigator for THREE (3) years following completion of the project (BPPM 90.01).

Washington State University is covered under Human Subjects Assurance Number FWA00002946 which is on file with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP).

Review Type: New

Review Category: Exempt

Date Received: 9/10/2009

Exemption Category: 45 CFR 46.101 (b)(2)

OGRD No.: N/A

Funding Agency: N/A

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<https://MyResearch.wsu.edu/MyPreferences.aspx>

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require separate delivery.

MEMORANDUM

TO: CAROL SIEGEL and Elizabeth McMenemy

FROM: Malathi Jandhyala, Office of Research Assurances (3005)

DATE: 10/16/2009

The IRB staff have evaluated the proposed amendment to the Exempt study, "Game on Girl: Women Gamers and Identity" IRB #11036) and have determined that the amended study procedures remain exempt from IRB review under 45 CFR 46.101 (b) (2).

The study procedures have been amended to include:

- * Expand response options to include emails and text messages
- * Revised questionnaires with few additional questions and minor changes on the existing questions

You may conduct the study, as amended above, without further IRB oversight. Your department shall maintain oversight of the project.

Further changes will require that a new Request for Amendment form be completed and submitted to the IRB.

If you have questions, please contact the Institutional Review Board at (509) 335-3668. Any revised materials can be mailed to Office of Research Assurances (Campus Zip 3005), faxed to

(509) 335-6410, or in some cases by electronic mail, to irb@wsu.edu.

Review Type: Amendment

Review Category: Exempt (2)

Date Received: 10/15/2009

OGRD No.: N/A

Agency: N/A

Thank You,

Institutional Review Board

Malathi Jandhyala

Human Subjects Review Coordinator

Office of Research Assurances

Albrook 205

PO Box 643005, Pullman, WA 99164-3005

E-mail: mjandhyala@wsu.edu

Phone: 509-335-3668

Fax: 509-335-6410

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APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Girl Gamers: Self Representation and Identity – Interview Protocol

Q1: How would you define “a gamer?” What does it mean to be a gamer? (Ask for examples)

Q2: Describe your favorite game character and/or game. (probe: gender, violence, platform, alone or online, etc.)

Q5: Tell me about how you go about selecting and creating an avatar. (Probe: gender, skin color, clothes, body type, etc.) Do you make specific choices in terms of the clothing and other gear you use? Do you ever play male avatars? Do you feel there are any benefits to being a female avatar? Have you experienced gifting either from players you know or from other random players?

Q7: How do people react when you tell them you’re a gamer? Are they surprised? When you’re playing online with other people, are there specific reactions to you being a “girl” gamer? Please describe one of these experiences and how you felt about it. Q4: Tell me about how your family and friends view your gaming. (probe: male vs. female reactions)

Q3: How has your gaming evolved as you’ve played? When and what kinds of games did you start playing? Tell me about a time in your life when being a gamer was really important or valuable to you. Or about a time when it wasn’t as important as it is now.

Q6: What do you think the differences are between male and female gamers? Are there any? What about other people’s perceptions of gamers and stereotypes? Are they different for male and female gamers?

Q8: What aspects of gaming culture draw you into playing? What do you like about it or what do you find annoying?

Q9: How do you connect with other girl gamers? Do you have a webpage? MySpace?

Facebook? Twitter? Game conferences?

Q10: How much and how often do you play? By yourself or with other gamers?

APPENDIX C
INTERVIEWEE DETAILS

Name	Age	Location	Player Type
Arin	43	Houston, TX	Neutral
Beautyunadorned	22	Bronx, NY	Neutral
Bonwhin	23	Georgia	Self
Callie	42	Texas	Self
CarmenGray	37	Southeast	Self
Chuck	28	Texas	Self
FieryFlower	25	Shephard, MI	RP/Self
Hontou	27	Houston, TX	Neutral/Self
Jayknee	59	Texas	Neutral
Jenny	24	Bellingham, WA	Self
Makea	50	Minneapolis, MN	Neutral/RP
Mandilar	21	Wisconsin	Self
McSherrie	34	Austin, TX	RP
Moonkitten	30	Portland, OR	Neutral/RP
Ms Happiness	25	Texas	Neutral/Self
Penny	42	Florida	Neutral
PinkGeek	46	Southeast	Self
Rae	38	Houston, TX	RP
Samantha	32	Massachusetts	Neutral/Self
Sarafena	22	Philadelphia, PA	Neutral

Seimiya	23	New Jersey	RP
Shandeigh	26	Connecticut	Self
Simone	26	Seattle, WA	Neutral/Self
Vampicorn	22	Texas	Self
Wen	42	Olympia, WA	RP
Yzma	32	Englewood, FL	Self
Zoe	28	Colombia, MO	Self