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> The fact that many games are designed for a teenage male market probably goes some way to explaining the predominance of stereotypical and sometimes demeaning representations of women, That does not mean, however, that all players 'read' or use the signifiers of gender and appearance in the same way. (King and Kryzwinska, 2006, p. 183-4)

This paper was initially intended to be about the roles women like to take when playing games. How do they socialise? What roles do they prefer and how do they imagine them in terms of role-play? It quickly became apparent however, that a more pressing issue was at stake, prompted largely by the responses to questions asked amongst players of both genders. Why do men like playing women so much, and how do they understand this role?

The intense speculation around Lara Croft as a site of gendered tension in games has skewed a more pressing factor for the players of games, – namely that players of all genders are accustomed to approaching female avatars as one option amongst many, and that they often chose these for ludic, rather than gendered reasons. This act has normalised the adoption of female avatars by male players to the extent that they feel more comfortable with assuming them as gameplay devices. In beat 'em up games, the female characters have evolved so that they often possess the more technical, difficult moves to reproduce, meaning that they are often regarded both as challenging to play and as a marker of proficiency. Furthermore, the social context in which beat 'em up players engage with each other and the game often means that they are in direct contact – in the same room or arcade, for example. There is thus nothing to mask the players 'real' appearance from each other. Thus, man playing woman has become a normal practise, and not one that is seen as either aberrant or subversive.

Lara Croft altered this perception. In *Tomb Raider* and its sequels, the player exists in isolation to others. Speculation over the role of the male as female, over the site of Lara's own body, and over the relative consideration given to the cross-gendered performance is therefore related to directly. Whilst many have expressed unease about Lara's appearance and her relationship with the player, Helen Kennedy suggests that the experience is a deliberate act of transgendering:

> One potential way of exploring this transgendering is to consider the fusion of player and game character as a kind of queer embodiment, the merger of the flesh of the (male) player with Lara's elaborated feminine body of pure information. This new queer identity potentially subverts stable distinctions

between identification and desire and also by extension the secure and heavily defended polarities of masculine and feminine subjectivity. (Kennedy, 2002)

However, whilst Lara was alone with the player, she was not alone in a rapidly developing game world, where a multiplicity of female characters was emerging. Alongside Lara, other game genres were already making active use of female avatars for various purposes. Whilst these did often conform to derogative images of women, they were increasingly used for different purposes – by female players to express self, and by all players in order to play in a completist manner. Additionally, the introduction of figures such as Elaine Marley (*The Secret of Monkey Island*, 1990) allowed feminine expression which did not necessary always conform to passive ideals of the damsel in distress.

More recently, the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Game) has become one of the most popular forms of gaming. Within this construction, players can usually adopt either a male or female avatar without there being a statistical difference between genders (these differences are instead enacted through more traditional Dungeons and Dragons - style differentiations of class and race). The choice of male or female avatar again becomes a site for examination, with studies noting that there is a predominance of male characters who choose female avatars – Nick Yee estimates that over 80% of male players cross gender during play (Yee, 2007). Most often, this is attributed by researchers as 'more concerned with mastery and control of a body coded as female within a safe and unthreatening context' (Kennedy, 2002). However, although there is a great deal of weight to this argument, the viability of computer avatar within an established historical games context, where players already have established responses towards avatar selection, is not considered.

In a series of interviews and observations recorded within the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* by the author, considerable resistance to the idea of cross-gendered experimentation was encountered. Users described, candidly, the many reasons for choosing to play either gender. This paper argues that the relative freedom with which these players express their arguments is in part derived from their familiarity with adopting avatars of both genders throughout their gaming lives. By the time of MMORPGs, the adoption of a female form was such a naturalised action that many players now choose to move across gender for aesthetic pleasure, rather than from a need to experience a new form of being. Players are so used to this action that they do not see it as deviant. Rather, they celebrate it as a fan activity unique to them.

Early Games, Special Moves and Spinning Bird Kicks.

Computer games as we know them were invented by young men around the time of the invention of graphical displays. They were enjoyed by young men, and young men soon made a very profitable business of them, dovetailing to a certain extent with the existing pinball business. Arcade computer games were sold into male-gendered spaces, and when home computer consoles were invented, they were sold through male-oriented consumer electronics channels to more young men. The whole industry consolidated very quickly around a young male

demographic – all the way from the gameplay design to the arcade environment to the retail world. (Laurel, 1998)

As Brenda Laurel suggests, there were few early female characters simply because the target demographic of games did not anticipate them as users. Significant previous work in Games Studies, not least through the discussions presented in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat* (Cassell et al. 1998), trace both the beginnings of gender studies concerning games, as well as the early patterns of female involvement in games' play, design and participation. It is however worth noting, that the presence of women in games has in some cases been overlooked. The blue valkyrie from *Gauntlet* (1985) may have been a blur of pixels and thus hardly female in form, but she was still a formidable gameplay choice, the heroine sidekicks of Lucas Arts point and click adventures are feisty as well as fully clothed and Samus Aran is of course, famously revealed as female at the end of *Metroid* (1986).

Streetfighter II (1986) is however a landmark in gaming. Although not the first beat 'em up, it reconfigured the genre in new ways, with manga-style animations enabling cartoonish movement; bright, lively scenery; strong characterisation and a revolutionary new style of 'special moves' which differentiated each character not simply by speed, strength or health, and demanded that the player activate a series of complicated yet intentionally organic manipulations of buttons and joystick in order to complete each action successfully.

In *Streetfighter II* the player had to chose between eight central characters (later, the four boss characters were also available to play through unlocking Easter Egg secrets). One of these was Chun Li, a Chinese detective for Interpol on the hunt for her missing father. Chun Li was strikingly dressed in a blue qipao (a long tunic with split sides allowing the legs more freedom), which showed most of her rather chunky thighs, her hair in 'ox horn' buns with ribbons. Chun Li's special moves included the *Hyakuretsukyaku*, the Hundred Rending Leg, (more commonly know as the Lightening Kick), which enabled her to kick her opponent in an animated 'blur' of feet, a smaller but faster version of the *hadoken* fireball thrown by counterparts Ryu and Ken, the Spinning Bird Kick, in which she leapt onto her hands and span across the screen, repeatedly hitting her opponent in the head with her upside-down kicks, and an ability that allowed her to bounce herself off walls (in this case, the 'wall' being the players screen – so one might perhaps ironically refer to this as bouncing off the Fourth Wall), then stomp on the opposing player's head. Overall, Chun Li was the fastest of the characters in the game and the one whose moves were also the easiest overall to execute, although they had less relative power than most of her male counterparts, making her a formidable opponent. These abilities, rather than her femininity, led her to quickly become a favourite amongst the hardcore arcade gamers that David Surman identifies in his analysis of the series, as well as amongst tournament and casual players in arcades and later, on consoles (Surman, 2007a).

The *Streetfighter* series prides itself on the tactile identification with its audiences – the first arcade console was predicted on how hard a player hit the buttons, for example, a legacy that was continued in the 'light, medium, hard' buttons that replaced this formation in its second iteration, and the special moves that a player must perform mirror joystick movement with the animated resultant action (Surman,

2007a, p. 211). The game deliberately presented characters that were fast, slow, long reaching, more powerful, more agile or able to carry out more devastating moves. Difference in fighting style was therefore an essential part of the game. Chun Li therefore became one of these differences – she was the fast, nimble character who sacrificed power for speed. These elements clearly gave her an advantage and meant that frequently she was chosen for statistical gain, not for gender preference.

Chun Li's obvious advantages to a novice player were coupled with her engagement with the audience. She is easier to play by a novice than her male counterparts, allowing a far greater degree of luck in winning if her player button bashes and swivels the joystick wildly to execute a special move. However, her avatar is also altogether more playful. After winning a bout, the hardened Interpol warrior again breaks the fourth wall, facing outwards towards the player and leaping up and down in a triumphant dance, or giving a 'victory' sign with her fingers and loudly proclaiming 'Ya Ta!' ('I did it'). This admission of fallibility (she might not have 'done it'), as well as the glee of Chun Li's avatar as she celebrates her victory in such an obviously childish manner is far more satisfying than male counterparts such as Ryu, who never says anything, instead folding his arms and letting the wind blow through his hair, or E. Honda the wrestler, who merely grunts a taciturn acknowledgement of his win.

The tradition of Chun Li as fast, endearing and also skilful had a lasting affect on the beat 'em up genre. From the *Streetfighter* series onwards, the option to play at least one female character was usually present in beat 'em ups. Clear descendants from Chun Li can be seen in many of these figures; Mileena and Kitana (*Mortal Kombat*, 1992), Pai Chan (*Virtua Fighter*, 1993), Jung Chan and Ling Xiaoyu (*Tekken,* 1994) and Kasumi and Lei Fang (*Dead or Alive*, 1996) all wear the qipao, for example. Jill Valentine and Claire Redfern of the *Resident Evil* series (1997, 1998) also exemplify the ways in which a female protagonist with slightly different skills from a male counterpart can be used to alter gameplay of the same scenario.

It also possible that Chun Li validated the pleasure of allowing the player to admire self as avatar. In *Streetfighter II Turbo* on the SNES (1991), an Easter Egg allowed Chun Li to appear in a different coloured qipao; and from *Super Streetfighter II: the New Challengers* (1993) onwards, characters had multiple colours available and this developed throughout games until by the time of *Dead or Alive*, the aesthetic appearance of each woman was not only of paramount importance, but completing the game on various levels of difficulty, attaining certain scores or finishing with a particular character many times allowed multiple costumes, appearances and sometimes even hair colour and style changes. Even at this stage however, these women were firmly encoded within a male gaze – *Dead or Alive* had a notorious setting which allowed a player to change the extent to which each avatars' breasts bounced during combat, for example, and the subsequent release of games such as *Dead or Alive Xtreme Beach Volleyball* (2003) confirmed the link between attractive women and impressive costumes.

At this point there are several important things to note. Firstly, the assumption that female avatars generally appeared in skimpy, revealing costumes does hold true, but equally, many of these alternative appearances emphasised intricate costumes and graphical patterns that displayed the prowess of the designers. The ability to uncover [sic] alternative costumes also activated the ever-popular gameplay facet of

collecting; once the game was finished, it was not 'complete' until the whole array of alternatives was assembled. Thus the pleasure of viewing female avatars was accompanied by a gameplay aesthetic that encouraged users to keep playing for different gains.

Secondly, beat 'em ups were primarily social games – although players could play on their own (and presumably try to collect all the costumes available), the real pleasure was in playing them against real opponents. Thus the player who chose a woman did not exist in an imaginary limbo to their opponent; usually they were sitting or standing right next to them, presenting the player with both the physical and imagined identity of their opposition at once, and normalising the virtual/real difference.

Thirdly, although female avatars clearly did pander to the male gaze, their statistical benefits against other players meant that they were often popular choices. Nina Williams from *Tekken*, for example, was often considered the most technically precise character, and the emphasis throughout on the game on long, very detailed special moves for women avatars meant that often the female characters were difficult to master, but very powerful once this was achieved. The female avatar was slowly becoming the avatar of choice; not because of appearance, but because of ludic gain.

Along Came Lara

A great deal has been written about Lara Croft – so much so that a casual observer into Games Studies might at first think that she constitutes the only female avatar in the history of games, and certainly the only one of feminist note. This is regrettable. Firstly, much of the early theory surrounding Lara prioritises her as a single female character from the emerging genre of the FPS, suggesting that previously, the choice to become a female character was limited. Secondly, detrimental readings of her physical appearance often overrule the pleasure of Lara herself, emphasising her bionic breasts rather than her dry wisecracks, and her curved appearance rather than her prowess as a gymnast and warrior.

It is thus useful to remember that Lara Croft did not exist in a vacuum; she was instead born into a world where female avatars already took an active part in gameplay lives. In 1996, when *Tomb Raider* was first introduced, the role of female characters in games was already well established, and as described above, it was often one of choice.

Lara is undeniably a figure of male desire. From her various incarnations as filmic idol, digital treasure hunter and front page pin-up, the sexuality of Lara cannot be denied… except perhaps by the role of the Tomb Raider franchise in promoting a fizzy drink. In 1999, Eidos and the Lucozade sports drink launched the 'Gone a bit Lara' campaign, following on from a series of animated advertisements starring Lara herself. In this, young women dressed as Lara Croft and presumably also under the influence of Lucozade hide on buses, are chased by dogs and ambush strange men in gorilla masks (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DADWwvfI33k). At the close of the advertisement, two women in an Accident and Emergency ward nod in

recognition to each other, immediately cutting into a final shot of many 'Laras' running desperately across a road.

In the 'Gone a Bit Lara' campaign, the implication is that many women, having played and enjoyed the game, were now trying to live out, or were perhaps subsumed by their fantasies in the real world. The advertisement Laras are desperate, frantic, alarming, but the emphasis is on their normality – they bear a passing resemblance to Lara in that they all have dark, plaited hair and wear Lara's trademark combat shorts, green vest and thigh holsters, but otherwise they are surprisingly 'everyday' in appearance. They are most emphatically not Angelina Jolie, the actress chosen to play Lara Croft in the film version of the game. The implication was that anyone, *especially* women, could go 'a bit Lara', presumably from playing too much *Tomb Raider* and drinking too much Lucozade.

It is this latter point that is crucial. Lara Croft may be demeaning, unrealistic, a site of horrific sexual deviance, a site of playful experimentation, bionic, sadistic and troublesome, but she was also a heroine to women as well as to men. For a generation of players accustomed to trudging around with the grunting protagonist of the *Doom* games and newer 'heroes' such as Duke Nukem (who gives cash to dancing girls during the game with the injunction 'Shake it, baby'), Lara was not only a welcome relief, but also a fantastic opportunity.

Tanya Krzywinska describes Lara Croft as 'a combination of both object and wilful subject' (King and Krzywinska, 2006, 181). It is undeniable that her appearance (highly sexualised) and her actions (highly aggressive) are problematic, but they are problematic because they throw into contrast an issue that was already of concern – the adoption of a foreign body within a gaming sphere as a virtual representation of self.

MMORPG: Many Men Online Role Playing Girls.

> Through role-playing it is possible to test out new frontiers and new roles. As a player of games, I have the leisure and luxury to explore what it is like to be something totally other. 'What are you', you ask, and I don't answer with my real gender, nationality or age. I am an orc, a shaman, in Kalimdor… I still know very well who I am, but I am also something else, something other –and online, playing a role-playing game, I set some of that other free. (Mortensen, 2007, p. 305)

The research concerning the question of men who play women has been fraught with difficulty. Many critics argue that in some form that men primarily cross gender in order to experiment as part of natural sexual development, to 'play' with gender ideas, or for reasons to do with the gaze, which are offset by traditional Freudian anxieties (Carr, 2002, Kennedy, 2002). The media frequently portray cross-gendered play to demonstrate the 'otherness' of players, and to some extent to encourage paranoia about players' identity online. Programmes such as *Wonderland - Virtual*

Adultery and Cyberspace Love (aired 30th January, BBC 1) emphasise the potential titillation factor of gendered online identity, encouraging sexual prejudices that suggest cross-gendered play is aberrant or deviant in form, and that it is predominantly sexual in nature. Gender switching therefore is seen as a site of tension, and these positions have largely informed gendered readings of male-female positioning within games.

There are also other elements that support the problematic depiction of gendered play in game worlds. Players often support the notion that many men choose female avatars because, as one parody on You Tube states 'you all know this is as close as I'm gonna get to an actual girlfriend' (IceflowStudios, 2007). Finally, as David Surman has noted, what players say about their female avatars and why they play them, and what they actually believe to be true, can be two separate things, with the latter a subject that they may feel embarrassment about, and predicated on their own social preconceptions and inhibitions (Surman, 2007b).

This research was therefore performed in a climate where players have been in some ways socially conditioned to believe that they are a minority. When asking them about their gender switching, however, the results were surprising. Informal questioning was carried out across a broad spectrum of *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004 – present) players – by asking a specific guild, by recording abstract comments or actions made by players, and by observing comments made on the forums that any player with an account can access. *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) was chosen because of its popularity – to date it is the largest online game in the world, with over ten million accounts. *WoW* has a reputation for attracting a broad spectrum of players, and for being responsible for introducing many new people to the world of gaming.

In *World of Warcraft*, all avatars (or 'toons') are the same body shape, weight and height, dependant on race and sex. They are differentiated by their clothes (gained usually by questing), and various customisable aspects chosen when the player selects an avatar, including hair colour and style, jewellery, horn size or shape, and facial features. A female human joke typifies this; 'Me and my girlfriends exchange clothes all the time; we're all the same size!' indeed, they are *exactly* the same size. This is an unusual option – changing shape is allowed in games such as *Lord of the Rings, Online* (where players can choose female hobbits with fat tummies or big bottoms, or choose male figures without the usual quotient of musculature) (2007-present), *Oblivion, the Elder Scrolls* (2006-present), and *City of Heroes* (2004-present). However, it is useful in this context as the set body form means that the female / male shape is uniform from the onset, and thus also regarded as a given by players. This is also interesting, as the specifics detailed above that initially drew players towards female avatars – the difference that female players offer, are *not* present within these games – instead of females being faster, having more detailed moves and so on, these statistical differences are determined by race (dwarf, undead, troll, gnome…) and class (mage, warrior, shaman, hunter…).

The ability to costume and display one's avatar is a core part of online gaming. The equipment that players wear is gained through questing and adventuring together, often in large groups or very difficult gameplay circumstances. High-level equipment tends to be ornate and distinctive (Eynalir, 2007, provides a visual record of this), thus clothing also denotes status. Very often, the form of the female displays this to

better effect – ironically, it is the curves and protuberances of the female form that emphasise areas such as chest, stomach and head in a far more obvious way than the thickset appearance of the male form. Morie et al. suggest that:

> Perhaps the conflation of the 'masculine' space of the computer, combined with the notion of 'gear' (armor and weapons) actually regenders costume play in more masculine direction[s]. What this suggests is that while costume play on computers may be creating more female-friendly play opportunities, conversely, it may also be opening up more avenues of dress-up for men. (Morie, 2007)

In addition to normal costuming, various festivals, special events and quests during the year provide players with costumes or objects that are entirely cosmetic – Santa Klaus outfits, Festival robes, free pets that vary from year to year (and thus are an indication of how long a player has been active), and so on, all of which encourage the idea of the avatar as something to be admired. This is borne out in the way that players most commonly justify their choice of an avatar of alternative sex. Players argue consistently that they choose women avatars because they like to look at them, specifically because the long term nature of play in MMORPGs means that if they are going to have to look at the same avatar repeatedly they want it to be an attractive one. This is as true of women players who choose to play men, as it is of men who choose to play women.

Many players specifically use this action to reaffirm normative ideas about all forms of gender identity. Heterosexual males specifically stated they were appreciating the female form whilst playing it, thus setting themselves in a sexual dichotomy in regards to their adopted avatar. Women who played women also broadly agreed with these ideas; in particular arguing that some avatars gained more attention than others. Several argued that alongside an attractive avatar, they enjoyed the ability to play a 'strong' female who is also good looking, therefore highlighting positive female attributes as well as looks (this was a particularly common argument on the web forums by female players). Although Nick Yee estimates that only 1 in 100 women play male characters (Yee, 2007), the ones spoken to during this study who chose male avatars argued that they found them 'cute' or more overtly 'sexy', or in one were compared to the player's real life dog as a less sentient, but still loveable figure. All of the women directly questioned who played male avatars expressed ideas of sexual empowerment through what they considered a subversive activity, either through being hidden (in a majority of men), or through their exposure of male ideals. One of the women who played a male described incidents in which she would tease other male players by using her avatar to emote light-hearted actions targeted at their avatar such as /flirt, /kiss and /hug, regarding this as an act of empowerment, 'getting her own back', and playing with sexual norms (woman as male, woman interacting as homosexual male) from which surrounding players 'in the know' took amused enjoyment and interpreted specifically as teasing. Players on the WoW forums predominantly cite visual aesthetic (not liking the way certain avatars looked or moved) (WoW Forums 2007a-d), as well as playing male characters in order to avoid unwanted attention. (WoW Forums, 2007b): At the same time, the description of the male avatars as 'cute' seems to suggest that women players also chose more sexually passive representations of the male figure. No players identified themselves as gay, and it is fair to say that preconceptions and bigotry on this matter are an extremely distasteful part of play, even though the use of sexually offensive language is forbidden in the EULA (End Users License Agreement) and subject to a ban.

Overall however, avatars were deliberately and consciously objectified by players, who often used this definition to reaffirm their own sexual potency in order to negate claims of deviance or atypical responses about their adoption of differently gendered avatars.

Players are absolutely unrepentant about the fact that they find the female avatars more attractive. This is a subject of almost continual debate, on the forums, in guild channels, and even in roleplay activities. Interestingly, this is also related to definitions of maturity. Players, by and large, feel that the skinnier, or overtly sexualised female characters are the domains of younger, more sexually immature players. Conversely, players who like curves also style themselves as older and more mature. (Whether this has any actual relationship to a player's real age is not clear). Furthermore, players justify their adoption of the attractive females by arguing against the aesthetic of the male forms. They find these appearances off-putting and 'unrealistic', an interesting commentary on a body which is as objectified as the females; most of the males have traditional fantasy style bulging muscles and shoulders bigger than their heads. Interestingly, it appears that the hyper aggressive forms of the males are seen as intimidating; one player described his glee at being able to play a skinny wizard in *Lord of the Rings Online*, suggesting that both wizards ought to be skinny, and that a more normative body shape made him feel more at ease with the form (Parsler 2007). It is ironic perhaps, that male players recognise the objectification of their own bodies, and do not like it, whilst still responding to the over-exaggerated female form as an object of desire.

The argument that appearance adds to the overall aesthetic of the game is in fact a valid one, regardless of whether it inspires the activation of female objectification. As Geoff King and Tanya Kryzwinska argue; 'the fact that the player's sense of being-in-the-game-world is mediated is made explicit in third-person games because the player-character can be *seen*, as an entity entirely separate from the player. The character is designed to-be-looked-at, as well as to-be-played-with (King and Krzywinska, 2005: 100). In this respect, the act of transgendering is therefore crucial to the spectacle of play, as well as clearly existing 'apart' from the player:

Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of gendered objectification is that players also regard swapping gender as interchangeable with race or other signifiers of difference:

> … something that I like about women chars is that they allow me to play something that I am not and... if I am going to be a half rotten walking copse... what's so strange about wanting to switch gender? (Azeroth Elders, E)

> … I would never roll a human male or female because 1) I am already human (vaguely) so whats the point of playing a fantasy game and being something I am already? (Azeroth Elders, L)

This suggests that the normalisation of adopting a cross gendered avatar is simply seen as one of many selections, none of which have bearing on a players' actual real life orientation. In the case of the second respondent, male and female roles are seen as equivalent, and not as interesting as being something new. The fact that choosing a gender is seen as equivalent to choosing a race or a character class is in fact heartening – defined as normative choice rather than subversive activity, and thus implying that sexual difference is accepted as a familiar act of gameplay.

One of the reasons for this identification with the avatar as an aesthetic or a character, rather than as a 'person', is the response to role-playing within the game. Some players very strongly identify with their characters as role-played identities; characters that they create and that have backstories exterior to gameplay. This is not usually sexual in nature (another common misconception associated with the term elsewhere), and players are very aware of their identities as constructed beings that they then act out:

> I'm a guy playing a female character because that's just what it is for me. A character which I control … She's just a character I developed over some years, just like a writer would design the people in his novel or whatever. (Azeroth Elders, Ja)

> Me, I have rolled a female char for the challenge of Roleplay, see if I can 'fit' into the role of a female, being a male myself. … I mean, I know about everything about being a guy, I wanted to see if I had suffcient knowledge of the feminine world to play a girl. (Azeroth Elders, A)

An alternative to this presents itself through players who simply regard their avatar as a tool. If male and female both have the same function, then why not choose either? It is important to note, as we have done elsewhere, that MMORPGs do not have to be played as 'roleplaying' games, certainly if one defines roleplay as the conscious adoption of a created identity. (MacCallum-Stewart and Parsler, 2008). MMORPGs, despite their moniker, have a relationship with roleplaying games which take the statistical elements of tabletop and live action roleplay games rather than the imaginative ones (Eyles, 2007), and many players regard their actions within them within this context. The gender of an avatar is therefore irrelevant, since 'roleplay' itself is a minority occupation, and gameplay where the realisation of self as a characterised entity is not really possible supersedes this action (Parsler and MacCallum-Stewart, 2008).

Players are aware that the avatars they interact with, especially if they are female, are unlikely to be the same gender as their online counterparts. This is however often taken to extremes, with players making the assumption that virtually all players are male. A lack of concrete evidence about the relative percentage of female players, as well as consistent depiction by the media of the gamer as male, white and middle class also supports this assumption. From personal experience, it is common for female avatars to be asked if they are 'really' women in real life by other players, and often to be disbelieved particularly if one's play is of a high standard, should the answer be an affirmative.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that players feel that women avatars are given more help, given more social leeway, and are allowed to make gameplay mistakes with fewer consequences, another common subject for the WoW Forums (WoW Forums, 2006, 2007a). Most female players counter this with by arguing that not expecting or requiring gifts, and refusing them if they do appear to be given on the basis of gender, particularly in order to make this behaviour stop, is more common. 'Real' female players therefore do not like this perception and frequently resist it.

Overall, a clear pattern emerges – players are continuously seeking to normalise the playing of avatars of the opposite gender, but at the same time they genuinely see it as a standard practise. Male players who adopt female avatars are not seen as usual or freakish within what can be an extremely male orientated environment. Players are certainly not laughed at or shunned for gender-bending; in fact it is seen as perfectly normal behaviour within the context of the game:

The idea that games are the domain of geeks with few social skills is so institutionalised, that like fan cultures, players often support these ideas as a form of self-defence. The gamer as a solitary and sexually inexperienced figure is also part of this construction. Surrounded by a bevy of pixelated beauties, this mythology then reconstructs the salivating fan as redirecting desires inwards towards unrealistic 'fake' avatars. This type of behaviour is seen by Henry Jenkins as typical of fan cultures, where groups take the accusations levelled against them and support them in both an ironic and a self-conscious form. The textual poachers idea argues that fans will appropriate images of themselves and celebrate them, often reinforcing ideas that may not necessary hold true (Jenkins, 1992). In fact, although the percentage of male/female players is unknown, it is acknowledged that many more players are female than gaming communities might often claim. However, because most players will appear to others simply in the form of the avatar, and not, for example, be subjected to direct questioning about their gender, or not have their real gender 'discovered' through forums, additional technologies such as the Teamspeak or Ventrillo voice programs, or through meeting in person to the majority of other players at large, the stigma that most players are young, insensitive and male still predominates.

Unease does remain. Players affirm that their behaviour is not deviant by continually having the same conversations about why they choose an alternative gender; one of the responses to such a question on the WoW forums asking for stories about cross gendering players was 'This topic again? Is it that time of the week already? Good lord...' (Clearsky, WoW Forums, 2007e). The answers too, seem to have become largely stock-in-trade; men like the female avatars, women want to avoid undue, gendered attention and be regarded as gaming equals. These reaffirmations serve not only to normalise cross-gendering, but also to render it safe, heterosexual and emancipating rather then associated with homosexual desire or transgendered desires.

Conclusion

In his preface to *Undertones of War*, Edmund Blunden defiantly asked his reader, 'Why should I not write it?' (Blunden, 1933) challenging the conspiracy of silence that had hitherto surrounded the conditions of the First World War, but which nevertheless, virtually every combatant was aware of. This striking 'Undertone', which had survived for nearly fifteen years after the war ended before it found a voice in the war poets and writers, bears incredible similarity to the player, whose attitude when adopting a cross gender avatar is very much 'Why should I not play it?' Naturalised by years of play in which swapping gender was a statistical, technical or mandatory choice, players are also drawn to the female body by cultural conditioning which invites them to admire and appreciate the female form far more than the male.

Like many fan communities before them, these players have embraced their oddities and now celebrate them as part of their uniqueness. Cross gendered play is one of these things – little understood from an exterior perspective, which often seeks to pillory the playful adaptation from male to female and vice versa. Unlike other worlds, game worlds are immersive spaces where a player is their own agent; free to take their own actions, but crucially enmeshed between the avatar they play on the screen, and their own identity. This causes an irresolvable tension, but it is a tension that players fully embrace during play. Their responses to their transgendered counterparts are playful, self-aware, unselfconscious, deviant, and played for as many different reasons as there are people themselves. However, these players come from a standpoint in which the actions they take are normalised – although increasing amounts of women play games and online games, the assumption that a player may be male irrespective of what avatar stands on the screen predominates.

More than any other media, the videogame allows players to revel in their own embodiment as alternative beings. This may involve the conscious adoption of objectified bodies within each game world, but these are bodies that that player also recognises that they cannot 'own' in a physical sense, and that do not belong to them as corporeal figures. The videogame body can however come to represent the player for considerable amounts of time; in online games, one's avatar becomes a persistent, representation of self; one that often remains immutable once it has been chosen.

In a world of heroes, in fantasy and science fiction settings, players see adoption of the hyper-real body as a clear signifier of heroic qualities. This may indeed include disenfranchising representations of both sexes – willowy women and bulging brutes, but it is interesting to see how extreme the tendency to choose the female form has become. The Conan-style hero now appears to be associated with qualities of oafishness, aggression and bravado that also make the more passive yet simultaneously feisty qualities of a heroine more desirable. An over-abundance of muscles seems to have the opposite effect to an excess of curves, with older players repeatedly and specifically stating that they find this type of avatar visually unattractive and difficult to identify with. At the same time, there are still points of tension – 'ugly' avatars are still defined primarily through pejorative sexual terms by players, and the statistics for avatar choice support the fact that more sexualised body forms are more popular than those deemed to be either less attractive or simply sexually absent (Rollie, 2007). This does not obscure the fact however, that choice, even if it is regarded through sexual 'norms' still passes freely across gender, with aesthetic pleasure overriding the potentate sexual anxiety of playing the opposite sex.

> For all these complicated issues, however, it is still 'play'. Thus it offers a dynamic forum for exploring identity issues where mistakes are not terminal and new ideas can always be tried. It encourages serious study into the issues as well as allowing casual exploration. (Antunes, 1999)

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