

Socialising, Subversion and the Self: Why women flock to Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games

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Abstract

As consumers, women are traditionally ignored by computer and video game developers and publishers. However, in recent years they have grown to represent the holy grail of mass media acceptance, and executives are eager to understand their gaming preferences, styles and habits. Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMOGs) offer students of video and computer games the opportunity to explore a genre attractive to this population and to deconstruct the aspects of online virtual worlds which encourages them to play. Within this analysis, the contemporary female gamer is placed in historical context and traditional barriers to female game play are considered, including temporal, economic and social constraints. Subsequent consideration of the unique properties of online gaming includes the formation of salient social networks, the cohesiveness of online groups, the absence of traditional barriers to ascension in game-world hierarchy and personal empowerment through safe identity play. Current demographics are assessed and methodological options are noted.

Between the inception of mainstream computer gaming and the early 1980's, the entertainment medium was perceived as a pursuit for the "whole family". Computer games publishers and developers did not differentiate their audiences by gender, but aimed their games at both Dad and Little Jane. While arguable there were titles that appealed to one or the other audience, most software featured themes of exploration, adventure, puzzle-solving or simple task completion, attractive to players of all ages and both genders. However, between the release of Nintendo's Entertainment System (NES) in 1986 and the Sony's PlayStation in 1995, this sentiment was replaced by the pervasive view that girls don't play computer games, and applications for their machines followed suit.

During these formative years of home computer entertainment, the software products that were released for Nintendo's NES and subsequent SNES, Sega's MegaDrive and the PlayStation featured boy-centred themes based upon traditionally male pastimes like sport, fighting and science fiction. The result was a gendered design for game play which did not appeal to the potential female gamer.

The financial prowess of the industry by the end of the 20th century offered little incentive to broaden the target market. Qualitatively this attitude still exists today, in the design of interactive entertainment and the marketing of the software and, quantitatively, in end-user consumption. This oversight has resulted in the exclusion of contemporary girls and women from computer play, thus removing an important avenue through which they could learn to use technology in their adult lives.

In the late 1990's industry luminaries attempted to readdress this balance. Their effort shaped what is referred to as the "girl games" movement, producing software genre called "pink games". While titles featuring high school teen Rockett from Purple Moon Interactive and McKenzie and Co. from Sirenia Software were effective in ingratiating interactive gameplay within a girl-friendly, story-driven context, their developers' intentions were overwhelmed by the indiscriminate release of superficial "girl"-branded CD-ROMs based upon the enormous success of Mattell's *Barbie Fashion Designer* in 1997. Some critics argue such short-sighted spin-offs led to the ultimate demise of all forms of "pink" gaming. Others suggest that the

movement's focus on "girls" stereotyped all female consumers, and their products floundered as a result of not gaining access to the important adult female market.

Since that time the issue has been persistently sub cultural, but there are signs that there is a renaissance of interest. In 2004 annual Women in Games Conferences were established in the UK, New Zealand and the USA, gathering together male and female contributors to some of the most important roles in international gaming powerhouses like EIDOS, Sony, Sega, Microsoft and Nintendo to discuss issues such as representation, inclusion and support. This united front of powerful games industry professionals, coupled with publishers' recognition of the value of a potential female market has re-opened the debate of the role of women as active consumers of interactive entertainment.

Key to this second coming is that the viability of targeting this population has been noted in the tremendous offline successes of titles like *The Sims* series and in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMOGs) like *EverQuest*, *Ultima Online*, *City of Heroes* and *The Sims Online*.

In reference to the latter genre, international games companies like Electronic Arts, Sony and Microsoft have committed to increase their capital attention to the medium, projected to be worth \$1.5bn in North America by 2007 (Olhava 2), continuing to rise at a rate of over 50% in the forthcoming years (Becker 3). While such products are currently limited to the processing prowess and bandwidth available only on PCs, the advanced technology of next generation home systems will allow participation of hundreds of concurrent players in one game environment. The expected player base of these games, consisting of both traditional and non-traditional gamers, is likely to rise as the accessibility of these virtual worlds encourages participants to log on and engage with others in these unique spaces.

When considered beyond the fiscal revenue and marketing potential, such environments open up a further array of questions to students of computer and video games. Primarily of interest to many researchers and industry analysts is why they attract a proportionately larger female player base than other contemporary offline and online titles. This chapter aims to address three particular aspects of the genre which research suggests appeal to women: that they can use the environments to develop salient

communities, that they receive significant feedback from the environments and other players for the actions they undertake in the game, and that they use the games to play with their sense of self. What follows is a brief overview of the genre and contemporary demographics. Subsequent analysis will examine further the three issues which appeal to women about this genre as inspiration for future research in the area. First, however, it is appropriate to place the argument within the context of general gaming preferences of the female player.

Qualitative research suggests that there are some unique predilections in game choice for adult women, and while a controversial contention, some propose that they are related to leisure constraints (Bryce & Rutter "The Gendering" 1; Thrane 110; Manrai & Manrai 120), social representations (Wiley, Shaw & Havitz 19; Schott & Thomas 1), economic disparities (Krotoski "Chicks and Joysticks" 15; Parker & Dromgool 32), and specific aspects of game design (Graner Ray 48).

The Office for National Statistics in the UK Government's Home Office research department has quantified that men enjoy one hour and 30 minutes more free time per day than their female partners (Office for National Statistics 4). This figure is replicated across Europe and North America, with disparities between the sexes at 30 minutes to two hours (Eurostat 12). While longitudinal studies indicate that these figures are narrowing as women take on more paid employment and men adopt more work outside their traditional office hours, the current state is important to note in reference to their leisure time choices. It can be argued that women's selection of titles, like the offline version of *The Sims* which relies upon short-term goals to propel gameplay forward, and titles which feature elements of high reward for low commitment, reflects their limited access to time-heavy pursuits.

Other genres which qualitatively and quantitatively significantly appeal to female populations, particularly puzzle and browser-based titles like *Tetris*, *Solitaire* or *Bejewelled*, offer the gamer indirect challenges in simple, cohesive formats which can be completed in less than five minutes. That they only like such "light" titles is a misrepresentation, however; when "pick up and play" is not a barrier to their uptake,

women will engage with a game for more time on average than males partaking in the same activity (NielsenNetRatings 12).

Leisure research also indicates that women's free time is spent primarily in social pursuits (Office for National Statistics 2). Current gaming applications are perceived as solitary and are often rejected on this basis (Krotoski "Online Games" 30), however, women do enjoy computerized entertainment in the company of friends. Contemporary offline "party" titles intended for multiplayer experiences like dance mat, infrared camera and karaoke games are responsible for up to 1/3 of new console sales in the months after release (Sony Computer Entertainment Europe Press office 2); in an already saturated user-base this implies that non-traditional audiences are buying gaming machines for this software.

Socially, whether through unspoken cultural representations or more explicit marketing techniques, women are also discouraged from aligning themselves with gaming circles. Henry Jenkins argues in From Barbie to Mortal Kombat that boys' uptake of the home computer console from the 1970's through the 1990's was a reflection of the suburbanisation of America's youth, and allowed them the opportunity to explore their boundaries within a safe, home-based, computerised environment. For girls, he argues, who historically were not offered the same freedom of exploration as boys, the computer systems and their software applications did little to assist in the types of play that was encouraged by parents: practice for a future life of domesticity. Jenkins' conclusion was that girls did not play on the home machines because female play styles were not catered for in the games that were released for the home user (262-297).

Gaming inhibition extends, unsurprisingly, to public playing. Work conducted by Bryce & Rutter ("Killing Like a Girl 15) in Local Area Network party environments and games consumer spaces suggests that the male-dominated atmosphere contributes to the notion that a computer is "something a woman is not" (Turkle "Computational Reticence" 43), and therefore detracts the female participant from engaging in such activity.

Women are also less likely to be aware of the breadth of computerized entertainment and are often solely exposed to titles that are owned by male relatives or colleagues. Only exceptional titles that are

expected to have a wide appeal, like the 2004 European release of Sony's karaoke game *SingStar*, are placed in traditionally women's magazines or are advertised during "women's" television programming; the propensity of the marketing and PR departments is to publicize the release of games in male-valenced and specialist genres, thus directing the product towards the audience which is most likely to produce substantial revenue. The subject matter of the ads and the representations of female characters within the games further compromise the perceptions of gaming as a male activity, positioning them within a 14-24 year old heterosexual male market (See Figures 1 & 2).

Insert Fig. 1 about here (caption: Source: Nintendo Europe, advertisement [For Men](http://www.nintendo-europe.com) 2004: <http://www.nintendo-europe.com>)

Insert Fig. 2 about here (caption: Source: EIDOS Interactive, advertisement [Fear Effect 2: Retro Helix](http://www.eidos.co.uk/games/info.html?gmid=81) 2001: <http://www.eidos.co.uk/games/info.html?gmid=81>)

A historical pay disparity also arguably contributes to women's choice of interactive products. While the Consumer Electronic Association reports that females are the primary purchasers of technology for the home, many of their acquisitions are for the collective, like televisions, hi-fi systems or digital cameras (Consumer Electronic Association⁴). In their game play technologies, research indicates that they prefer to play on last-generation hardware or PCs (Parker & Dromgoole 37), using titles which come highly recommended by trusted friends, are related to an existing IP like film or TV licenses, or are sold at a reduced rate. The important issue raised within this context is that women are unlikely to be considered "hard core" because they are not purchasers of first-release games. Records of second-hand merchandise or sales for hardware that is obsolete are not collected by software tracking organizations, and therefore the application choices of women are often ignored.

Qualitative analysis suggests that men are more likely to purchase a traditional game for a home console, while women will purchase software with a skill-enhancing value for the PC (Graner Ray "Gender-Inclusive" 83). Such applications include typing lessons, tax-return software and anti-virus protection. These results imply that women do not view gaming as "entertainment" but as software through which to effectively

learn. However, focus group research for pink games produced by HerInteractive, founded in 1995 and still successful in female games circles today, suggests that both girls and women enjoy games that feature negotiation, manipulation and conflict resolution (Graner Ray "What Girls" 1). Titles like *Devil May Cry*, *Ico*, and *Halo* rate highly in qualitative research amongst women for these reasons.

When considering the success of other forms of entertainment media with this population, research indicates that narrative and character development are aspects girls and women discuss as of particularly important to them (Parker & Dromgoole 84). Most games of the past did not display the depth of narrative or character description that merited the time spent on them compared to, for example, a book or a film. Similarly, if present many plotlines featured a male protagonist rescuing a helpless female. Often the story thinly veiled the true nature of the product, which encouraged onscreen violence or simulation of pastimes traditionally of male interest. The breadth of applications that appeal to this population is increasing as contemporary gaming continues to be lauded for its plots, its open-ended nature, the exploration and the depth of narrative, yet for the reasons discussed above, they do not have access to, knowledge of to time for them. What therefore does appeal is gaming that is relevant to their lives, features significant story and character and be played on their own terms.

Recognizing this, many designers are utilizing the advanced technology of contemporary computing systems to create software that encourages a depth of play. An important and exciting characteristic of contemporary interactive entertainment for many women is the incorporation of designs which offer the chance to choose the narrative themselves. Often referred to as an "emergent" storyline, the players of such games are free to invent the direction of the plot and to play out personal goals. While offline titles like *The Sims* arguably offer a virtual dollhouse with which to explore such play on an individual basis, MMOGs provide the palate for social networks to engage with one another in order to generate mutual stories, enacted through characters that are generated by the players themselves.

Another possible explanation for the recent rise in female game playing figures is that over the last decade there has been a shift in the perceptions of IT which has arguably evolved because of mainstream

uptake of personal computers by both sexes. Particularly notable is the rise of internet use by women, who represented only 6% of users in 1994 (Bowker & Liu 631) and became the 52% majority in the US in 2004 (Greenspan 1). Internet gaming applications, like quizzes, competitions and puzzles have opened the door to the computer game medium for many women. In 1998, 39% of internet users were female (Bowker & Liu 631), one-third of the total online population played games over the World Wide Web and 53% of them were female (Interactive Digital Software Association 3). By 2004, online gaming boosted the on- and off-line adult female gaming population to a figure higher than that of boys aged 6-17 (women 18+=26% boys 6-17=21%, N=806; Vanarsdall, 2).

Resnick & Andersen (12) suggest that women engage in online activities to expand their communication networks, and many of the games women play online feature a communication component, from spin-off communities to multiple-user cooperative gameplay, like MMOGs.

MMOGs are three-dimensional virtual environments in which players solve problems, attain goals, form relationships, develop skills and perform roles in a real-time internet-based fictional space. They are task-oriented adventure stories with elements of action, puzzle-solving and exploration. The plots range from fantasy (*EverQuest*, *Ultima Online*) to Science Fiction (*Star Wars Galaxies*) to contemporary (*The Sims Online*) to abstract (*There.com*, *Second Life*), and underlying all titles across the genre are the basic tenets of trade, barter and asset accumulation (Bradley & Froomkin, 2003). MMOGs are games in the sense that they exist within a system of challenge and reward, however there is no set conclusion and successful titles can continue to play out over a period of years. Their closest offline relatives are the paper-based role-playing titles like Dungeons & Dragons, although MMOGs reach a broader audience and feature hundreds of thousands of simultaneous players.

Players access the environments from remote personal computers in order to complete pre-designed tasks and to interact with other participants in each world (Castronova "On Virtual" 1). Each player develops an avatar to represent him or her on the screen, featuring proscribed abilities according to class of character (e.g., warrior, healer) which serve to assist in the attainment of game-directed goals. Players can

devote their online activity to the development of one particular skill (e.g., spell-caster, farmer) or can choose to pursue abilities across the character spectrum at the same time. Those who have been involved for longer have amassed experience, translated into "levels", which delineates them from new players and arguably creates social power structures (Taylor 17). This system also creates the personalization of character favored by the female player.

MMOGs offer open-ended game play, the relaxation of traditional objectives, opportunities for exploration, strategy, collective dynamics, real-life communication and relationship development. Female gamers respond to the community-driven, socially-stimulating nature of these titles, as well as the option to get through the games without the need for violence or for completing proscribed tasks (Yee "Norrathian Scrolls" 51). Because there is no set conclusion, players are free to use the environments to explore out with the objective-orientation of many of the games and the online, multiplayer element pushes interactivity to new boundaries, allowing the gamer, female or otherwise, to help shape the environment, determine the goals and influence the texture of game play with the input and reactions of thousands of people around the globe.

Research has indicated that the female population of the most popular MMOGs varies between 12-20% of all regular players (Yee "Codename Blue" 2, Griffiths, Davies & Chappell 84). Other titles that highlight a female-friendly element, like Electronic Arts' *The Sims Online*, indicate that up to 59% of their players are women (Lewis 1). This suggests a gender preference for certain types of game settings, which is mirrored in demographic ratios for offline activities. Players of *EverQuest*, for example, are more likely to have been involved with paper-based role playing games (67.7%, N=896; Yee "Norrathian" 13) and the population for female participants of paper role playing games is similarly small (between 5-15%: Fine 253; 8% Douse & McManus 505).

The Sims Online is an excellent example of a successful MMOG design for a female audience: the emergent storyline takes place in a relevant setting and is based upon the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Like the offline titles in the series before it, players have the choice of dedicating

as much or as little time to the play as they choose, without fear of penalty. This title has the same basic tenets as all MMOGs but play takes place in a contemporary setting with contemporary tasks like finding a job, finding a mate and buying consumer products. Players can also purchase popular brands, from McDonalds hamburgers to Levis. Offline iterations of *The Sims* boast a population that is 60% female (Lewis, 2) and those who enjoyed one of the previous versions on a home PC or a videogame console will have been more comfortable with the product and will have continued their relationship with it, albeit in a multi-player format, when they transferred to *The Sims Online*.

For many other MMOGs, it is traditionally the male partner who introduces the female player to the computer game and 69.5% of female MMOG gamers play with a romantic partner. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the cooperative nature of the game tightens real-world bonds while allowing the pair to role play solutions to offline fractions in a safe environment (Gonzales, 4).

Women average five to six years older than their male gaming counterparts (Interactive Digital Software Association 3; Yee "Codename" 2). Socially, they are more likely to have children and be in a steady relationship or married than male players (N=2448, female = 60.3%, male = 33.1%). Increasingly many report finding the games themselves, particularly after the birth of a child. Those with small children often find themselves isolated from social situations, and learn to log on to increase group interactions.

Group participation in MMOGs is encouraged, and often players set up self-generated guilds in order to overcome game-related and group-determined obstacles. These can be enduring or transient collectives, and some early demographic research indicates that 81% of participants regularly engage with the same others (Yee, 2001). Because participants interact with others in a real time social environment, the negotiation of online personal and social identity is arguably subject to the same social psychological paradigms as their real-life counterparts (Spears & Lea 32).

The anonymity of the medium plays a noteworthy part in the development of fast bonds between individuals. The effects of such freedom of identity have been noted by researchers of social psychology in offline situations. For example, Rubin examined disclosure between strangers on a train. His work

demonstrated that revelation of the personal stories that one would normally not express, even to members of salient social circles, occurs because the anonymity between train passengers allows them to express themselves openly with little potential repercussion (233).

Research into the anonymity of online environments suggests a comparable effect. While little empirical study has been undertaken in MMOGs regarding the development of online friendship, parallels can be drawn from another form of synchronous internet communication, the chat room. Certainly differences exist between these two media, however the disclosure between community members in chat room-based text interaction and that of MMOG-based text interaction can be extrapolated to be analogous.

Levine's work proposes that friendships developed online are established between people who meet frequently, share similar interests and mutually divulge information about themselves (568). Through mutual disclosure the individuals determine like-attributes and as Bargh, McKenna and Fitsimmons (2000) suggest, participants in online activities are more likely to project a vision of similarity upon the person or persons with whom they are communicating than in offline situations, based upon the experience of their own sense of freedom to express a "True" or "Actualized" self online (46). Such relationships have been found to have deep meaning for participants because of the perceived support, openness and honesty involved in the communication. Particularly for women, the traditional minority in online game environments, such encounters represent the formation of groups for support and companionship with like others.

A notable difference between chat and gameplay, is that while in the former disclosure is the only method through which participants can grow closer, in MMOGs disclosure is arguably augmented by the fact that players are encouraged to engage in tasks or to overcome multiple obstacles cooperatively. Therefore, liking in the games is not only based upon perceived similarities, but also through action. In-group community participants are determined, through mutual experience, who can be trusted to support the collective across activities. People who "group" regularly spend time in the game together engaging in activities that form the basis of similar experience, and thus relationship bonds are rewarded.

Female players are more likely to both interact with the same people and to engage in group activities on a regular basis (Yee "Norrathian" 50) and women report both a greater sense of similarity to their online friends and that their online friendships are better than those they have offline. They also report that they are more willing to disclose to online friends than those in offline social circles (Yee "Norrathian" 51) and are less likely to switch to another online title when it is released (Yee "Codename" 19) because they are more closely tied to the friends they have in their current online world. They report a greater satisfaction with the game than male players (Yee "Codename" 8) which suggests that the community and social aspects of MMOGs play a large part in the reason they play these games.

Women's allegiance to their online group manifests itself in the fact that they are more likely to hold elected positions of power in their online MMOG communities than men (%male(1145)=15.3, %female(229)=25.3, $p < .001$; Yee "Norrathian" 35) – more so percentage-wise than in offline business (Bowker & Liu 643). These positions are often elected in-game, which indicates that women are regarded as trustworthy, responsible and approachable by both male and female players. Yee's research corroborates this; women are more likely to adopt pre-determined "healer" characters (Yee "Codename" 17) which have special attributes that benefit players in distress and anecdotal evidence suggests that female players offer more advice, dispute mediation and support to participants of both sexes (Stephen 5). Consequently, it is women who direct activity, diplomacy and politics and they receive direct feedback from the players and the game dynamics for their actions. Because they are able to recognize the ramifications of their actions they experience a higher sense of in-game efficacy and indeed, women report increased offline self-confidence from game play and a belief that they can learn from their MMRPG experiences (Yee "Norrathian" 51).

Early research suggests that MMOGs may be avenues of empowerment for a population that is arguably subject to offline assumptions associated with the social representation of their sex. Work indicates such suppositions limit their choices of possible selves (Curry & Trew 115; Loo & Thorpe 15), careers (Hakim 108) and leisure pursuits (Bryce & Rutter "The Gendering" 8; Thrane 112; Manrai & Manrai 120).

Indeed, women have been the subjects of internet study since the early 1990's, and much work has focused upon the potential for the medium to alleviate culturally-imposed gender stratifications.

Within this body, a glut of work has examined the formulation of a variety of online "selves" for identity play, escape and deviancy within multi-user, text-based virtual environments (e.g., Multi-User Dungeons or MUDs; Turkle "Life on the Screen" 177-209; Calvert 57-70), the precursors to MMOGs. However, since the mid-1990s little academic work uses that or similar platforms to examine identity processes (for exceptions see Bers 365-415; Talamo & Ligoro 109-122; Consalvo 48; Thomas 665-672).

Commonalities between this limited research and studies of internet interaction and identity suggest that MMOGs encourage the negotiation of self primarily because of the potential to virtually try on varying desired or feared fantasy roles and have them reinforced or refuted by the game design or the in-game social interactions. This mirrors online work by Turkle ("Life on the Screen" 117-209) whose qualitative research examined the varying self-presentations in MUDs and the offline meanings users ascribed to them. While the adoption of certain selves offline may be limited by feasibility or the expected reactions of salient others, there is suggestion that the virtual environment may proffer an avenue through which to express an infinite number of desired or undesired identities (Bargh *et al* 38; McKenna & Bargh 687; Berman & Bruckman 90).

The opportunity for women to explore "selves" in these games is enhanced by the fact that female and male characterizations enjoy equality in skill and advancement. As for populations who similarly experience barriers in offline life, women have the capacity to choose a variety of selves traditionally unavailable to them offline that can compete with the status quo on a level platform. Taylor's ethnographic study of women in an online game suggests that women enjoy aspects of online activity like mastery, social involvement and the ability to explore areas on their own without fear of safety, regardless of the representations imposed by others (28).

Further, in research that examines women who gender-bend, or take on an avatar of the opposite sex, they report a sense of empowerment associated with the opportunity to explore relationships, to

enhance their understanding of the sexes and to examine the assumptions they have about their own gender (Turkle "Life on the Screen" 219). Interestingly, a variety of studies using varying methodologies have suggested that women are less likely to gender-bend than men, preferring to take on physical characterizations that are similar to their perceived offline selves (Yee "Norrathian" 84 Griffiths *et al* 83, Graner Ray 117, Krotoski "Online Games" 48). This poses unique problems however, as gender discrimination is not wholly absent online. Research suggests that character accounts that present as equal on all levels except gender including skill, armaments and special powers, cost between \$40-55 less in out-of-game eBay auction sales than avatars that present as male (Castronova "The Price" 13).

Some theorists consider the game-play element of the genre an important aspect of self-negotiation (Frasca 169; Carr 2). Frasca suggests that the immersion offered in computer and video gaming makes it possible for the player to reflect on in-game behaviours, choices and interactions (170). Gee expands on this argument, theorizing that activities undertaken within online role playing games in particular are key in the process of active self-learning. He posits that players project offline goals, values and understandings upon the varying online personas which they negotiate within the task-oriented, social spaces. He theorises that the feedback participants receive through interaction with others and the environment serves to reinforce these projections within that context, and ultimately offline (169-198).

Methodologically, researchers in this area have used a variety of qualitative techniques, from surveys (Yee "Norrathian" 6; Yee "Codename" 8, Griffiths *et al* 82), ethnographies (Taylor 23) and in-depth interviews (Krotoski "Online Games" 42). Quantitative research is limited in this area, however with new virtual environments encouraging their use to explore learning and research into aspects of human behaviour, such designs may proliferate in the future.

Using the internet to gather data is a contested method. While some argue that online networks allow researchers to access phenomena and populations who are not traditionally available for study, others suggest that techniques for data collection have questionable validity. Certainly an exploration of such issues is appropriate when undertaking research in this domain.

The online multiplayer element of MMOGs offers a social environment through which women are encouraged to practice skills in a safe space, with the end result potentially incorporated into offline life. More work into this vast area is deeply encouraged as the genre increases in number and audiences. Particularly exciting is the potential to readdress the gender imbalance of computer games consumers through examination, design and attention to these worlds.

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