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Women and Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games: Their roles and their effect

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*Abstract*

The female presence in virtual worlds like *The Sims Online*, *EverQuest* and other Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMRPGs) is having an effect across the interactive entertainment industry, as well as on real-world economics, law and health policy decisions. Normally dominated by men, women are attracted to the dynamic, online element of the gameplay, which emphasises social interaction, community behaviour and identity construction. They are drawn to the games because, as participants, they have an important and active role in the ongoing development of the virtual society. This paper reviews the history of the genre and examines contemporary research in the area, referring to existing published and unpublished data and drawing upon preliminary semi-structured interviews with six female players of MMRPGs. It studies the roles women play within the worlds, how the medium affects their offline self-identities, what they take from the experience, the pitfalls

of participation and what the implications of increased numbers of female participants are for the future of the entertainment industry. The importance of the medium for offline social issues is examined and future research in the area is considered.

## 1. Introduction

The videogame industry remains dominated by males both in development and application. Although there have been notable attempts to include non-traditional audiences in the interactive entertainment spectrum, games for women are restricted to games that appeal to girls. Products like Barbie Fashion Designer may have affected the play patterns of under-12 year-olds but the adult female gamer requires more stimulation than a pink house and a plastic boyfriend. Recent cross-gender breakthroughs like EyeToy, Sony's set-top interactive camera which puts the player on screen and responds to movement, and dance-mat controllers which require the player to use her feet to step to the rhythm of a digitised Simon Says, have opened industry eyes towards what women might enjoy in mainstream computer amusements: active involvement, direct feedback, group collaboration and fun. These products have limited appeal, however, and unless developers expand the repertoire of titles which use the technologies, they will end up in the bargain bin of garage sales across the nation.

The people creating computer games are invariably men who believe they are making titles for male consumption. Their response is well-founded; traditionally women have not been consumers of mainstream electronic entertainment. The few pockets of female influence that exist within the industry primarily fill the roles of artists and support staff. The ownership of ideas, plots and scenarios belongs to the creative imaginations of the male designers and producers, and most popular games reflect this by featuring large guns, rigid objectives and scantily-clad female characters.

In contrast, Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMRPG) offer open-ended game play, the relaxation of the traditional goal-oriented game play, 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 fastidiously collecting items (Yee "Norrathian Scrolls" 51). 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.

In this paper I theoretically examine why these games attract women more so than other contemporary titles, what effect they have on the game worlds, how the game worlds effect their offline identity and how their presence is affecting the greater development world.

## 2. Materials & Participants

I investigate the phenomenon with the assistance of information learned from six semi-structured interviews, comparing the transcripts with survey work previously undertaken in this area within the context of greater internet research and within the framework of Rubin's work on anonymity (233-60) and Lyman & Scott's theory of "Free Territories" (74). I interviewed six female players of Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games over email. They were between the ages of 24 and 31 and had played the games for at least two months. One woman had played her game for over one year. Three played *EverQuest*, one played *Phantasy Star Online*, one played *Asheron's Call* and one played *Ultima Online*. I recruited them through existing contacts and used their responses as preliminary resource material for my investigation.

I did not look for a representative sample, but approached these women for their anecdotes and insights as a non-gamer interested in their perceptions of these world. In future work I intend to conduct more interviews and survey a wider population of female gamers.

However, these participants' insights gave a welcome introduction to their views of the roles they play in MMRPGs.

I relied upon existing questionnaire and survey analyses from a published source (Griffiths, Davies & Chappell 81-94) and an ongoing un-published source (Yee "Codename", --- "Norrathian"). The former focuses on participants of only one MMRPG title while the latter examines the populations of three.

### 3. Background

#### *Women and Computer Gaming*

Female involvement in computer games traditionally declines with age. Often they only reengage with them vicariously through partner play or the play of their children. While both boys and girls enjoy interactive entertainment, compared to the adult male population, adult women claim they have less time for leisure (Thrane 110; Manrai & Manrai 120) and believe a computer is "something a women is not" (Turtle "Computational Reticence" 46). Most discard them as products that don't "speak" to them or are a waste of time. Indeed, most titles 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, 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, like sport.

The tide is beginning to turn, however, because of mainstream uptake of computers by both sexes resulting in a shift in the perception of IT. Particularly notable is the rise of internet use by women, who represented only 6% of the total number 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 games 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 (IDSA 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).

### *Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games*

Research has suggested that the most common application of the internet for women is communication (Resnick & Andersen 12), and many of the games women engage in online feature a communication component. MMRPGs are the most ambitious type of online game.

They are three-dimensional virtual reality worlds in which players of all ages solve problems, attain goals, trade, form relationships, develop productive skills and perform roles in a real-time internet-based environment. They feature hundreds of thousands of players simultaneously engaging in the same game play in small groups and online communities on a single virtual landscape in a single virtual world<sup>1</sup>.

Every character that a participant meets in the online world has a human being controlling it, like in traditional internet-based communication environments, but unique to MMRPGs is the task-oriented nature of the interaction. As players engage with the same others to achieve game-determined goals, they develop social workings within their groups and are rewarded for long-term commitment both materially (in the form of advancement) and psychologically (in the form of an increased circle of friends). Unlike in traditional offline computer entertainment in which a player is involved in as much as the pre-programmed application allows, when players make decisions in MMRPGs the consequences have an impact on other players' "lives" which can reverberate throughout the greater game dynamics, effecting virtual economies, trade patterns, alliances and politics. Further, any impact will perpetuate beyond a single interaction with the game; regardless of whether the player is "logged on" the online world continues, endlessly changing under the influence of others. By

being involved in these real-time, community-based situations, the millions<sup>2</sup> of people who converge on the fictional landscapes are intrinsically responsible for the establishment of unique social systems and rules. Because these social components are elemental to the games' workings, women are developing expansive communication networks. The female population occasionally dominates the gender ratio of a MMRPG, turning the traditional view of computer game players as solitary adolescent males topsy turvy and gaming companies are learning from their involvement.

MMRPGs grew from the text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) prevalent on the early World Wide Web, which served as meeting-points for computer-literate individuals. Participants developed characters, objects and physical spaces from text descriptions created on their personal computers which were connected to multi-user servers where players intermingled in real-time.

MUDs were relatively unrestricted realms of free expression, similar to the Living Theatre movement of the 1960's. Contributors were at liberty to present themselves in any way their imaginations allowed, as consistently or inconsistently as they desired. The "self" onscreen could be as close to or as far removed from a real self-identity as a player chose, and reflected aspects of personality he or she wished to expose at the time they logged on. MUDs came to be described as "identity laboratories" (Turkle "Life on the Screen" 180) and research has examined the ways users played with their notions of Self.

As technology progressed, the "windows" into the online worlds advanced visually and the communities grew to rely upon the economics of trade, barter, production, investment and asset accumulation. Games are now presented in three-dimensional, first-person virtual reality perspectives. Players adopt characters, known as "avatars" and personalise them with genders, species, hair colour, skin decorations and fashions unique to the player. Commitment is encouraged; through experience, practice and use, characters advance through levels which

distinguish them from new players. Progression is founded on successful completion of prescribed tasks and goals, although the player is free to explore the world without partaking in game-related activities. There is no conclusion and no one can “win” the game.

### 3. Analysis

#### *Demographics*

Research has indicated that the female population of the most popular MMRPGs 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 a title which already has a female pedigree; offline iterations of the series boasts a population that is 60% female (Lewis, 2). This title has the same basic tenets as all MMRPGs 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. Those who enjoyed one of the previous *Sims* 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*.

Women, on average, are five to six years older than their male gaming counterparts (Interactive Digital Software Association (IDSA) 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%), and 69.5% play with a romantic partner. Often offline couples “group” together, and anecdotal evidence suggests that the cooperative nature of the game tightens real-world bonds. Further, couples who are experiencing relationship problems when playing the game are provided the opportunity to role play solutions in a safe environment (Gonzales, 4). Traditionally it is the male partner who introduces women to the computer game, but increasingly many report finding the games themselves, particularly after the birth of a child. Isolated from social situations, internet-savvy women learn to log on to increase group interactions.

### *Social Interactions: The Online Effect*

The anonymity of the medium plays a noteworthy part of the development of fast bonds between individuals. Rubin’s offline examination of disclosure between strangers on a train 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).

In virtuality, one often communicates with others who are not in the same city or country, let alone train compartment. Responsibility for one’s expressed thoughts is therefore similarly alleviated<sup>3</sup>. Repeated interaction, which rarely occurs between passengers on a train but regularly happens online, encourages a continued stream of open expression. Like in chat rooms, it appears that friendships developed in MMRPGs are established between people who meet frequently. While in the former disclosure is the only method through which participants can grow closer, in MMRPGs disclosure is augmented by the fact that players are encouraged to engage in tasks or to overcome multiple obstacles together. The bonds are cemented by determining, through mutual experience, who can be trusted to support the group across activities.

Bargh, McKenna and Fitsimmons have demonstrated that online anonymity also affects the individual's sense of identity. Because there are no perceived repercussions and the environment encourages open and honest disclosure, players report that their online persona is a "True" or "Actualised" reflection of themselves. Their research suggests that 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 (33). Already through mutual disclosure the individuals have determined like-attributes; by the very nature of the fact that they are women in a virtual environment they are more similar than women who are not engaging in the MMRPG. Further, people who "group" together regularly spend time in the game together engaging in activities that form the basis of similar experience.

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 therefore it is not surprising that women believe they are both more similar 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 tightly 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 MMRPGs play a large part in the reason they play these games.

### *Roles*

Women's allegiance to their online group manifests itself in the fact that women are more likely to hold elected positions of power in their groups 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) – which is an exciting element of MMRPG research. It is

women who direct activity, diplomacy and politics and they receive direct feedback from the players and the game dynamics for their actions. These positions are often elected in-game, which suggests that women are regarded as trustworthy, responsible and approachable by both male and female players. Anecdotal evidence indicates that female players offer more advice, dispute mediation and support to participants of both sexes (Stephen 5). Yee's research corroborates this; women are more likely to adopt pre-determined "healer" characters ("Codename" 17) which have special attributes that benefit players in distress. Such an active role in the game encourages dedication and because they are able to recognise the ramifications of their actions they experience a higher sense of in-game efficacy. Indeed, women report increased offline self-confidence from game play and also believe that they can learn from their MMRPG experiences (Yee "Norrathian" 51).

#### *Pitfalls and Problems of Being a Female Character in a MMRPG*

Since the early days of MUDs, researchers have noted a gender difference in how other players respond to a female presence (McCormick & Leonard 117). Real-life women who present themselves as female characters in MMRPGs are besieged by stereotypical responses, from harassment to offers for help to gift-giving. Of course, it's important to remember that the female characters are not necessarily played by women. The phenomenon of gender-bending allows players to "try on" a different sex and explore the reactions.

Men are more likely to take on a character of the opposite sex (Griffiths *et al* 86; Yee "Norrathian" 39) and often do so in order to profit from the benefits that they perceive female characters bring. They tend to be superficially involved in the characters, however, and are easily recognised by women players (Newton Dunn, 8).

For women who do take on male avatars, they tend not to use them as their primary personas, and rely upon female characters for day-to-day interactions. The male character is associated with releasing frustration, usually through aggressive activities, "because that is

more tolerated among men than it is among women” (Gonzalez 5), whereas the female characters are involved in community and learning.

### *From Online to Offline Identity*

The role playing element of MMRPGs allows players to explore dimensions of their personal identities. Through practice and positive social feedback from the games and the players, previously unexplored dimensions of their selves can be internalised and enacted in situations offline. In that way, MMRPGs – indeed, all internet interactions – take place in “Free Territories,” a concept discussed by Lyman & Scott. These territories are “free” in the sense that they allow individuals to explore aspects of themselves that would otherwise be restricted by the reactions of salient social circles (74). For example, alternative attitudes or internalized stigmatized identities can be explored in the MMRPGs with little consequence in order to determine if they should be exported offline.

Unfortunately there is a scarcity of such research on this concept of virtual worlds. Recently McKenna & Bargh followed the progression of participants of a newsgroup who discussed their secret homosexuality and suggested that eventual offline disclosure was related to the amount participants felt supported by the internet network and engaged in discussion (692). Because women are more likely to be involved in the communities and engage in online social networks, they are more likely to adopt what they have learned online into their offline lives. One participant said that her time in a MMRPG aided her offline occupation because she had held a leadership position in the game and this role helped her develop the self-confidence necessary for being a school teacher (Stephen, 4).

There is no doubt that the online world can effect offline emotions as well; online-to-offline romance attests to this. The effect is similarly increased by the amount of involvement in the game. For example, people who regularly engaged in a MUD called LambdaMOO were more affected by the incidence of a virtual “rape”<sup>4</sup> and the effect it had on the community.

While incidental users claimed that the violation was “a bit of fun” (Dibbell “A Rape” 20), the two female victims, one of whom helped to establish the MUD and the other who held a regulatory position, called for “virtual castration” and reported real-world distress (Dibbell “A Rape” 15).

### *The Industry and Implications*

The MMRPG environment is indubitably affected by the presence of female players. Increasingly, games companies are developing titles within the genre in order to attract the non-traditional population. Most new titles released on either Microsoft’s or Sony’s systems have an online component, thanks to the increase of technological prowess of contemporary television-based games systems, and although current Massively Multiplayer options are few and far between on these platforms, the door is open for the future.

The statistics are encouraging; the more women there are who play computer games, the more women will become involved in future game design. Companies are becoming aware that men are enjoying titles that have traditionally female elements, like depth of character, co-operative multi-player options and solid storyline. Further, female protagonists are beginning to surface, and not all wear Lycra.

### *Future Research*

In early 2004, China, Li Hongchen won \$1,210 from a Chinese games publishing company for the theft of his virtual property by hackers. (“Online gamer in China”, 1). By that point the offline financial prowess of MMRPGs had been witnessed, from the hard currency sale of virtual property (Dibbell “The 79<sup>th</sup> Richest Nation” 106; Castronova “On Virtual Economies” 1; Castronova “The Price” 1), the development of real-world agents for the trade of virtual land, characters and items (Dibbell “The 79<sup>th</sup> Richest Nation”, 108), and virtual designer-label clothing items for virtual characters (“New Game” 8, Eng 17).

However, economics is not the only arena in which there is a cross-over of virtual and real.

Papers at a recent conference suggested that the MMRPG is an ideal environment in which to test legal, economic and health policy models in order to test their efficacy before introducing them into the real world (State of Play). Currently under scrutiny by social scientists, market researchers, cultural academics and lawyers, these online goal-oriented territories provide insight into on- and off-line community behaviours, identity development (Talamo & Trigorio 109) rule-breaking and law formation. Certainly MMRPGs are more controllable and modifiable than the real world. Different versions can be cloned from one “map”, allowing parallel observations of behaviours in environments which are the same but support different rules, like antisocial behaviour, risk-taking or community-building.

Introducing new policy decisions or economic and legal models into the MMRPG social systems would allow researchers and decision-makers to understand how and why certain regulations are successful and to explore variations of implementation. Future research should examine the implications for such activity for the players of these worlds if, as suggested in this article, online experiences can be internalised. It would be interesting to examine the effect of online play on the offline self-esteem of persons with stigmatised identities.

Finally, clinical settings have adopted the Internet as an additional therapeutic environment in the course of treatment, particularly in Cognitive Behavioural Therapies for sufferers of Generalised Social Phobia, Depression and Avoidant Personality Disorder (Christensen, Griffiths & Korten 3; King & Poulous 34). Intriguingly successful, these studies have never tested the effects of treatment in online worlds, having been restricted to website interactions. Because the online worlds are reliant upon the social interactions of the players and the social systems that grow out of them, it seems a likely environment to examine the impact play has on such psychological issues.

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<sup>1</sup> A recent gathering of players of Sony's *EverQuest* featured 118,000 players logged on simultaneously ("EverQuest continues" 1).

<sup>2</sup> According to Castronova, there are several million people around the world who have access to a MMRPG account. He calculates his figure using media reports and company claims obtained in June 2002: "Lineage: 4 million; EverQuest: 400,000; Ultima Online: 200,000; Dark Age of Camelot: 200,000; Anarchy Online: 200,000; Asheron's Call: 150,000. This does not include any chat-based games or smaller titles that exist." ("On Virtual Economies" 1)

<sup>3</sup> see Bargh, McKenna & Fitsimmons; Whitty; Levine

<sup>4</sup> "Mr. Bungle" used a programme to break into the accounts of the "victims" and textually described explicit sexual acts to the other logged on members. Descriptions of sexual acts were not uncommon in MUDs, but were usually "whispered", or shared between consenting parties only.