Gender Swapping in MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games): A Study of Cause and Effect

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Abstract

MMORPGs are massive online social games that allow hundreds upon thousands of players to assume the role of an avatar while in game. This avatar is the player's physical manifestation of themselves in the game world. Some players choose to gender swap and play an avatar of the opposite gender. The goals of the study were to determine (a) which demographics participate in gender swapping, (b) why these persons participate in this behavior, and (c) to identify the consequences, both positive and negative, of gender swapping.

Introduction

Gaming has transformed from a hobby that takes place in basements to one that occupies crowded internet cafes and convention centers. As access to the internet has become more widely available and cost effective, gamers increasingly are utilizing their hobby as not only recreation but also as a social outlet. MMORPGs continue to push the boundaries of technology and human innovation by allowing thousands of players to exist on a single server simultaneously. Inspired by text based MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons) the MMORPG games of today are often expensive productions containing massive amounts of art and sound assets. This is a strong contrast to the limited scope of the original massively multiplayer online games, MUDs. While MUDs are less massive (often only allowing hundreds of players rather than thousands to be online) and employing no graphics or limited ASCII art they are still a valuable tool for research into understanding modern gender swapping behavior. Individuals have been gender swapping online since chat rooms and cyber communication were implemented, but MUDs took the concept to new heights. The role-playing aspect that MUDs allowed offered users the chance to not only masquerade as the opposite gender but to exist in that role on a continued basis. Players who gender swapped in MUDs could form relationships based around an identity that was not readily available to them in the real world. Often these relationships transcended the game to the real world and at times crashing down into social dysfunction as the gender swapper's true gender was revealed. Some MUDs even allowed their users to identify as gender neutral. While the shared space of MMORPG games has developed into a more graphically intense environment, the motivations that players have to gender swap have not evolved a great deal.

Research data taken from gender swapping studies based on MUDs shows similar results as more modern graphics based MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft (Bruckman, 1993; Potter, 2011).

There are some differences in the play environment that MUDs offer versus those available in graphics based MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft. Only the biggest and most successful MUDs are commercial endeavors. There is very little profit making incentive in the design of most MUDs. For this reason, MUDs tend to be extremely challenging and very unforgiving.
when a player makes a mistake. The impact this has on the social space in a MUD is immense. Players are encouraged to team up and look out for each other due to the risks inherent in playing the game. A single mistake made by a player can lead to the loss of all of their items or even permanent death for that player's avatar. Additionally, MUDs offer smaller servers handling only hundreds of players rather than the massive numbers of MMORPGs such as World of Warcraft. This smaller environment creates a more intimate social setting allowing players to more easily enhance or tarnish their reputation. It is similar in many ways to what happens when a person grows up in a small town where everyone knows their name versus a city where anonymity is all but assured. Other factors include the relative lack of voice communication used in MUDs versus the bigger graphical MMORPGs. A person can maintain their anonymity if they choose to gender swap more easily in the text only communication environment of a MUD. Individuals who choose to gender swap in a graphical MMORPG often are expected to use voice communication when participating in groups of players. Many times these voice communication tools are directly built into the game. This creates a challenge when a gender swapping player wishes to maintain their gender identity in the game and has to refuse to use voice communication or purchase voice altering software. Many in game groups and communities require the use of voice communication so as to more readily conquer the challenges the game presents with the faster response that voice communication offers over text only.

Existing research indicates motivations for gender swapping in online MMORPGs is varied. Response varies based on the participant's gender and age. Yee's data indicates that men in the age range of 23-35 are most likely to participate in gender swapping; females aged 35+ represented strongest among their demographic (Yee, 2003). Numerous reasons for gender swapping have been proposed under existing research. Glasser stated that male players gender swap as females to receive the attention and gifts available to them due to the typically male dominated online gaming environment (Glasser, 2007). Bruckman asserted that gender swapping allows individuals the opportunity to explore the nature of gender from a new perspective not previously available to them. She stated that the safe space of an online environment encourages individuals to experiment and learn about the experiences of the opposite sex (Bruckman, 1992, 1993). Some females choose to gender swap as males to be accepted as proficient at the game due to existing stereotypes of females as being poor players (Taylor, 2003).

The negative consequences of gender swapping have been explored in existing research as well. Players can retaliate when they learn of the true gender of a friend or romantic partner in game. Often they feel deceived or insulted. Communities in game can react with support or aggression towards those who gender swap and are discovered. Often, however, the fantastic nature of playing an avatar in a virtual world creates a sense of fantasy that allows gender swapping to be commonly accepted among players (Bruckman, 1992).

**Literature Review**


Bruckman discusses her first encounter with a gender neutral avatar in a massively multiplayer online MUD (Multi User Dungeon) game. Bruckman further explores the concept that gender
plays in our everyday lives. Bruckman analyzes the social ramifications of gender ambiguity in an online space. Bruckman discusses the changing nature of gender perception in an online space versus the physical world. Additionally, Bruckman analyzes the potential social impact of being able to temporarily exist as another gender in an online game. Bruckman states that the opportunity to role-play as another gender online can provide valuable insight into what persons of that gender experience in the real world.


Bruckman explores the impact of gender on social interactions in real life versus the virtual world. She concludes that the role of gender during social interaction in the real world is often more subtle than it is online. Additionally, she explores the incentives to gender swap in online games such as receiving extra rewards or attention from opposite sex players. The possible consequences of gender swapping, such as retaliation from other players, are explored. Bruckman states that players who court other players that gender swap often retaliate when discovering their true gender.


Glasser discusses the prevalence of chivalrous behavior that is bestowed upon female avatars in online MMORPGs. She discusses the ramifications that this presents for players picking female avatars strictly for the extra favors in game. She also details several stereotypical behaviors of male players who are playing a female avatar. This includes using too much pink or having stripper names. Author states that over 60% of male players have experimented with playing a female avatar in an online game. Author explores stereotypically female language used online by female players to further incentivize male players to offer them gifts or assistance by exaggerating their femininity.


Yee presents survey based data from both male and female respondents who played the online MMORPG Everquest. Data collected including the number and gender of the characters they played. Data indicates that of the men who responded those in the 29-35 range were most represented in playing opposite gender avatars in Everquest. The data also indicates that older players tended to play more total characters as well which increased the frequency of this statistic. Female players aged 35+ were the most represented in playing characters of the opposite gender but played less total characters overall.


Author examines the chosen “job” the player picks in the game and how it relates to their chosen avatar gender. Author found that female players tend to pick the role of damage dealer while
male players choose healer. Author correlates this behavior with these players wanting to experience the opposite end of the gender spectrum by playing a role that they would see as socially more acceptable for the opposite gender. Author also explores motivations for players who gender swap to reveal their true gender to others in game. Author determined that for casual play most gender swapping persons do not reveal their true gender. Additionally, author found that when playing non-casually with a regular group of friends that players revealed their true gender more often than not.

Boellstorff explores living life as an avatar in the online MMORPG Second Life. The author expounds upon social interaction including romantic encounters with both genders. The author explores the delicate nature of social interaction in a virtual space through the eyes of an anthropologist. Author explores the fact that real world social interaction norms have transplanted into the online world but gender is often irrelevant in these interactions. This is changing the social and cultural norms on the internet and author states that it may be affecting social norms in the real world. Author indicates that our concept of gender is becoming more ambiguous due to online interaction that defies culturally accepted gender roles. Author goes on to indicate that the anonymity provided by online games like Second Life allow persons to increasingly experiment with gender in ways that they would not be comfortable with in the real world.

Author explores the cultural norms that lead to gender swapping behavior by males in Brazilian society. Aspects of morality, cultural norm, and social status are examined in a strictly real world setting. Elements of self modification that individuals participate in to appear more like the opposite gender are detailed. This self transformation that some choose to participate in and the complicated maintenance it requires are contrasted by the ease in which someone can play the opposite gender in an online MMORPG game. Author discusses the social acceptance that the transgender in Brazil have. Much like the safe space that an MMORPG provides for gender swapping there are regions in Brazil that provide a relatively socially accepting stance for the transgender population.

The authors discuss online gaming from the female perspective in regards to relationships. Two avenues are studied. Straight culture is explored as the author plays a female character. Motivations for female players are explored such as avoiding harassment and proving themselves capable at the game. The authors also explore gay culture as they participate in a LBGT guild. Lesbian interaction is examined and the ramification this type of play has on players within the game is examined. Negative and positive benefits are discussed and the potential social ramifications such as being outcast are examined. Authors explore the tendency for LGBT players to gravitate towards LGBT only guilds because of this social pressure. Author also explores the tendency for there to be more LGBT based guilds in the United States versus in Europe indicating possible cultural differences and social norms regarding LGBT and gender
swapping players.


Social interaction among a group of teamed up players in online MMORPGs is explored. The author details the tendency in a group for the female avatars to be labeled as inferior or weak. Author explores the impact this has upon gender identity and preferred gender online. Author explores the motivation of female players to play in what are typically violent games online. The role of females and their expected behavior is examined. Author indicates the increasing demographic of female players who play games online is redefining the social role of the female gender. What was previously seen as a boys' only club is now more accepting of the female player and experience than ever before. Author states this is an evolving issue and that changes to the female experience in online games will continue to redefine themselves.


Authors explore the history behind online social gaming spaces such as MUDs to bigger graphically intense games like World of Warcraft. The lack of empirical research in the field of online gaming is detailed. The positive aspects of social interaction in online gaming are detailed and contrasted to similar social interaction in the real world. Authors discuss the evolution of what is defined as masculine in online gaming. Authors reported that over 57% of their respondents in the study had participated in gender swapping online. Additionally, authors found that playing as a female in a typically male oriented environment online had substantial benefits such as social power or in game gifts from other male players.

**Methods**

**Participants**

Five male and five female participants took part in the study. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 years (M = 22). Participants were recruited from directly within the MMORPG World of Warcraft as well as from an MMO themed internet forum. All participants involved in the study expressed that they currently or previously experimented with gender swapping behavior while playing online.

**Procedure**

Study participants were recruited from the popular MMO web site and forum www.mmochampion.com. Additional participants were selected from directly within the game World of Warcraft to ensure an even number of male and female participants. Interviews were conducted with each participant remotely via the instant messenger program Skype. The study collected both quantitative and qualitative data. Interview questions collected information on demographics (age, sexual orientation, etc.). Participants' playing habits (hours per week) were recorded as well. The study also collected data regarding the motivation to and consequence of gender swapping (why they do it, how they benefit, what are the ramifications).

**Results**
Quantitative

The median age of participants was 22. Only 1 participant self identified as gay while one abstained from the question. The remaining participants identified as straight. Half of the participants' highest education completed was High School. 2 of the participants (20%) had also completed some college while 3 participants (30%) had college degrees. A small number of participants (30%) played less than 10 hours per week. 5 participants (50%) played from 10 to 20 hours a week and 2 participants (20%) played for 20 or more hours a week.

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x = Participant declined to respond

Qualitative

Participants were asked the following questions and their responses recorded:

- Why do you gender swap in game?
- Does gender swapping benefit you in the game?
- Does gender swapping benefit you outside of the game?
- Have you had any negative consequences due to gender swapping?

Why do you gender swap in game?
(Male #1, age 18): I like the way my character looks when I play a female. I don't like the way the male characters look or move and I want to look at something sexy when I play.

(Male #2, age 22): Night elf females are super hot and I don't like the way my character looks from behind unless they have a hot ass.

(Male #3, age 45): Outside of the game, I am a gay man that occasionally engages in cross dressing behavior. I have always felt gender lines are blurred and I don't see a reason to not play both male and female characters in the game. I also like experiencing the different ways people react to my female characters versus my male ones.

(Female #4, age 19): No one thinks I am good at the game when I play my female toons (avatars). People assume I am a girl and probably not good enough to be in their groups.

(Female #2, age 22): I just think it is fun. I like the way the short gnome guys look and they are more fun to play than the female gnomes.

(Female #3, age 26): Guys always hit on me in game and I got sick of it. I play the game to relax and having to fend off an army of teenage boys got old after a while.

**Does gender swapping benefit you in the game?**

(Male #3, age 45): Not really, other than opening up more potential romantic interests. But that opens up a can of worms once they realize my gender in real life. Sometimes I don't tell them that though, unless things get serious. I guess I do get some items from potential suitors in game every so often.

(Male #2, age 22): I made a new character recently on a new server and had nothing to my name. Within an hour of play two high level players had given me gold and weapons that I would have normally had to play for weeks to earn. It felt like I was selling myself for them, but I didn't care - I saved weeks worth of time!

(Male #1, age 18): Lots of guys will give my female characters gold or items even at level 1. It's pretty ridiculous how easily I can gear up as a female character compared to my male characters.

(Female #3, age 26): Other players take me more seriously. I can get into higher level groups when I play a guy. I also get a kick out of seeing what things are like for guys when they play.

(Female #5, age 34): Maybe a little bit. It makes it easier to blend in. Sometimes I don't want to socialize much when I go online and being a guy in game tends to keep others from bothering me.

**Does gender swapping benefit you outside of the game?**
(Male #5, age 29): It lets me see things from my girlfriend's perspective. We play together and sometimes she gets slow or lags behind me because of all the tells (messages) she gets. I am more understanding now as a result.

(Male #1, age 18): Well I think it has made it easier to talk to girls. I feel like I understand them better having pretended to be one in game now. I'm always trying to get better at talking to girls. Sometimes I'll even make friends in game with other girls and they will have no idea I am a guy in real life.

(Female #1, age 21): My boyfriend and I communicate really well and sometimes I think my experience as a guy online has helped that. I don't know for sure though. It is nice to see what it is like to be in the other gender's shoes for a while.

Have you had any negative consequences due to gender swapping?

(Male #3, age 45): Oh where do I even begin? I've fallen in love with men in game who had no idea I was a man in real life. I didn't mean for it to happen, but it just did. Unfortunately, there was no fairy tale story; once they found out they stopped all communication pretty much. I'm still friends with one of them, but it has never been the same since he found out I am a man.

(Male #4, age 24): My female characters don't always get into as many groups when I am doing hard content. Usually once they hear my voice on vent (voice program) their attitude changes.

(Female #4, age 19): I have girlfriends who play the game and don't understand why I play a male character sometimes. Most of them are okay with it. One of them acts a little weird because of it though, like I am not part of the club. She's not a good friend anyway so it doesn't bother me too much.

Discussion

There are numerous drivers leading individuals to participate in gender swapping. Data indicates that access to higher tier guilds and in game power directly correlate to the gender of the player's character. Male characters find themselves able to move up the ladder of in game communities much easier than females based on participant responses. In contrast to this is the fact that female characters receive more gifts and attention from other players in game. The study participants often reported that the chance to experiment as the opposite gender in a social setting was very appealing for them as well. This experimentation extends to the in game role the player selects as male players often choose the nurturing healer role while female players chose to be the aggressive damage dealer (Potter, 2011).

The perceived in game benefits such as gifts and social power over others were strong incentives to gender swap for males (Male #1, age 18; Male #2, age 22). Other research studies have supported this conclusion (Zaheer & Griffiths, 2008). The opportunity for an individual to role play as the opposite gender appears to be a primary draw for both male and female players. The chance to experience communication and social interaction while in the opposite gender's shoes was appealing to the study participants (Male #1, age 18; Male #5, age 29; Female #1, age
The physical appearance of an individual's in game character has some impact on the desire to gender swap. Two of the male participants reported that their character's appearance and attractiveness was important to them. Particularly this response seemed to resonate from the younger players (Male #1, age 18; Male #2, age 22). It may be that the hormonal factors of youth or immaturity increase this response but it is not possible to determine this with the limited number of participants in the study. Sexuality was a factor in at least one participant's desire to gender swap. It would appear that individuals whose gender identity is ambiguous in real life tend to bring those same characteristics into the game (Male #3, age 45). Female participants reported that gender swapping allows other players to take them more seriously in the male-centric culture of online gaming (Female #4, age 19). Additionally, female participants reported that to avoid harassment and constant messages they would play a male character (Female #3, age 26).

Gay culture in online gaming does not seem to directly impact the behavior of gender swappers. LGBT players do tend to gravitate towards guilds that are designed around their needs (Sunden & Sveningsson, 2012). Gender swapping itself however appears to be a trait that is shared by gay and straight players alike. The desire to role play as another gender is not a gay specific trait as evidenced by the prevalence of gender swapping individuals in the study who identify as straight.

Negative consequences to gender swapping varied but all related to social backlash once players discovered the swapper's true gender. Additionally, one male player reported that his female character had trouble getting groups until his true gender was revealed, indicating a bias against female players (Male #4, age 24).

Further research into gender swapping would benefit from increased sample sizes as well as more intensive psychological profiling of the participants. Research up to this point has gathered significant data regarding the demographics and reasons behind gender swapping but has not addressed the individual personality traits of the participants. A full psychological profile of each participant in addition to a massively increased sample size could provide valuable insight into this behavior. Additionally, research would benefit from specifically focusing on the real world behavior of individuals who gender swap online to attempt to find a correlation between personality and behavior in real life and the motivation to gender swap online.

**Conclusion**

Gender and how we define it is constantly evolving. The internet and online gaming are providing new avenues to explore gender and redefine the gender and social boundaries that currently exist or remove them entirely. Social interaction online can even take a neutral tone in regards to gender. That is to say, gender has less impact in social interaction online than it does in the real world. This fact is causing our perceptions of gender to change and eliminating the need to define our personas around our gender (Boellstorff, 2008). There are real world examples of this as well such as the transgendered population of Brazil. Many regions in Brazil are very accepting of the transgendered population and have even created a third sex to identify them by -
travestis. These individuals have grown up in a social space that is very accepting of gender ambiguity and this has allowed them to express themselves freely and adopt this alternate gender identity (Kulick, 1998). This would not be possible without the safe space that these individuals have to decide for themselves who they want to be. This parallels with the online world of MMORPGs where there are virtually no real world consequences to gender swapping behavior. As more individuals go online and experience this freedom we may see increasingly blurred lines in regards to gender roles in our society. One thing is for certain - in the online world of MMORPGs the lines that define gender are already being blurred. As more individuals go online and find themselves able to experiment with gender swapping this blurring of gender roles will become only more prevalent. Individual experiences that occur online do not exist in a bubble and are certain to continue to influence our views on gender in not only the virtual but also the real world as well.

**Works Cited**


