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THE MEDIA, WOMEN, AND ONLINE GAMES

Urban & Environmental Policy Senior Comprehensive Project

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¹ Peter Steiner. [The New Yorker](#), July 5, 1993 issue (Vol.69 (LXIX) no. 20) page 61

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Executive Summary

Online games are rapidly creating a burgeoning community of hundreds of thousands of people from diverse backgrounds. The online community offers a fresh start for women and others who feel constrained by real world gender roles, and may be a place to start bringing about real-world change in gender equity and acceptance of people who choose to defy traditional gender roles. In this paper, the social and cultural features of the online gaming community are examined from a feminist perspective. Through a literature review and a survey of gamers, the ways gender roles and alternative lifestyles manifest themselves in the context of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are examined. This document seeks to survey how images of women are used by the media and compare it to the way images of women are used in online gaming. Additionally, a closer look is taken at gender roles and the acceptance of alternative lifestyles in the online gamer community.

Methods

Personal Interest:

This topic was of particular interest to me for a number of reasons. Growing up in a home with two younger brothers, I spent much of my childhood interacting with males. Even though I attended an all-girls' school, my friends lived in other parts of town and were overcommitted to activities like youth soccer and equestrianism, while my brothers' friends (for all effective purposes) resided on our couch and became part of our family for entire weekends at a time. As a result, I spent much more time growing up with young men than I did with young women and unwittingly found myself initiated into a culture that, at the time, excluded women almost entirely – computer gaming culture. I think my interest in the ways women fit into traditionally male communities was inspired by this time in my life. Online gaming is such a community – traditionally male-dominated, but growing increasingly popular among both genders.

Additionally, the way the media has treated women in recent years is fascinating to me. I view this project as an opportunity to examine the treatment of women in a genre that is less frequently explored in research. The “newness” of online games also seems to lend the online gaming community a degree of malleability that more traditionally media-saturated communities lack. If women enter the online community with certain standards and expectations for their treatment and demand to be dealt with fairly, the online community may become the standard for our “real world” communities in gender equality. Women today have the opportunity to help shape a digital community that embraces women, rather than clinging to narrow stereotypes of femininity and harmful ideals about thinness and appearance and allowing them to persist in the rapidly expanding online world.

Finally, online games are an activity that my younger brothers and I have shared all our lives. When we were very young, our father showed us how to link our computers over a simple network. The elder of my two brothers, William, and I set up games of *Doom* and spent our weekends together, engaged in games of “DeathMatch” that were, perhaps (as my mother pointed out many times) too violent. Though, in retrospect, the graphics and even the very values promoted by the game were appallingly inappropriate, we truly enjoyed spending time playing together. As we grew up and entered high school, we experimented with new games like *StarCraft*, *WarCraft III*, *Rise of Nations*, and others during our school breaks and even our summers home from college.

William passed away suddenly earlier this year. This project has given me the opportunity to remember our good times (and our bad – like when he pretended to be my ally and then turned around and joined forces with the aliens to crush me in *StarCraft* last summer). William was a tremendous help during the formative stages of this project and always someone who I could turn to in moments of joy and frustration. I dedicate this project to him, the most epic gamer I have ever known.

Research Methodology & Survey Text:

To research this project, I conducted database and website searches (the online world changes so quickly that few books include information that could still be considered “current”), examined public online forums for gamers to discuss current events and publications, and I conducted a survey of online game players. The questions were as follows on an online survey:

1. What is your gender?
Male
Female

2. Please select your age range:
18-20
21-25
26-30
31-35
36-40
41-45
46-50
51-55
56-60
61 or above

3. Please estimate how many hours you spend playing online games in an average week.
0-5
6-10
11-15
16-20
21-25
26-30
31-35
36-40
41-45
46-50
51-55
56-60
60 or more hours.

4. How many computer games do you play during 1 average week?
Only 1 game at a time
2 games
3 games
4 games
5 or more games

5. How long have you been playing the online game you play most often?

Less than a month
1-2 months
3-4 months
5-6 months
7-8 months
9-10 months
11-12 months
13-14 months
15-16 months
17-18 months (about 1.5 years)
About 2 years
About 2.5 years
About 3 years
About 3.5 years
About 4 years
About 4.5 years
About 5 years
About 5.5 years
About 6 years
About 6.5 years
7 or more years

6. Have you ever played a character of the opposite gender?
Yes
No

7. If you've ever played a character of the opposite gender, did you feel that other players treated you differently?
Yes
No
Never played a character of the opposite gender

8. If you've ever played a character of the opposite gender and you felt other players treated you differently, please select any of the following that you observed. Other players were:
More generous with resources
Less generous with resources
Friendlier
Less Friendly
More helpful in combat situations
Less helpful in combat situations
Easier on me when we fought against each other
More rough with me when we fought against each other

9. Have you seen other players acting differently towards a player of the opposite gender?
Yes
No

10. Do you feel it's appropriate for players to treat each other differently based on gender?

Yes

No

11. When you insult other players in the game, please select any of the following terms you use regularly (please be aware, the answer choices contain explicit language):

Jerk

Butthead

Asshole

Queer

Turd

Gay

Douche

Fag

Pussy

Noob

Stupid

Bitch

Lamer

Whore

Camper

Retard

Homo

Other (please complete fill-in box below)

I do not insult other players in the game – I use none of these terms and can suggest none of my own

12. What is your favorite game (or games, listed in order of preference)?

User supplies answer in text box.

The questions on this survey were inspired by the work of Nick Yee and the Daedalus Project: an online survey project that researches gamer culture and online gaming communities. The Daedalus Project has made tremendous strides in furthering our understanding of gamer culture since its foundation. I employed its research in an effort to better understand gamer culture in general, but I still had questions it could not answer about gender bending and alternative lifestyles – so I set out to conduct my own survey.

For my survey, I wanted a few things that the Daedalus Project did not explicitly seek out. I wanted a large contingency of female respondents. The Daedalus Project focuses on representing each gender equally, but some of my questions seek to better understand women's experiences in the online community and I wanted to make sure their opinions were represented.

I also wanted a high degree of anonymity so people would feel comfortable expressing their opinions, even if they were controversial. For this reason, as little personal data as possible was collected about each respondent. Without greater specificity in the background the survey has on each respondent, the ability to spot anomalies in the data (for example, someone who is a male to female transsexual) is diminished.

Survey subjects were recruited not only from within the Occidental College community, but from the Internet at large. Participants were solicited in the Oxy Digest, on The Facebook (an online community site that networks people at the same school, company, or in the same geographic region), MySpace (another networking website where members may host free profiles for others to see and meet people via the Internet), through word-of-mouth, and through online gaming website message boards and forums. Subjects were asked to participate in a short survey to inform research on gamer culture.

The web host I used, www.advancedsurvey.com, hosted the survey for no charge and collected data. It also performed very basic level analyses on the data (determined what percentage of respondents answered a certain way). The survey was left open for about three weeks and participants were solicited continuously throughout this period. In total, 60 respondents completed the survey. After “closing” the survey to further responses, I also imported the data into Excel and performed statistical analyses to determine if the data indicated statistical significance in any areas.

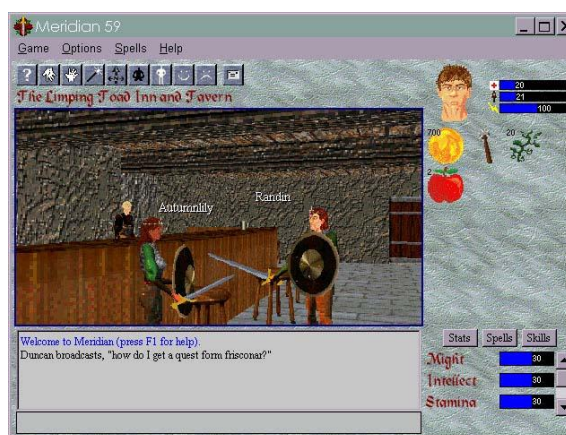
A Brief History of Online Games

Considered pioneers in online games, two LucasFilm employees created “Habitat” in 1985, the first game to offer players a persistent online world to interact with one another. The game could only be accessed with a specific type of computer (the Commodore 64) over a specific type of modem (QuantumLink). Habitat was a graphics-based game that supported up to 16 simultaneous players, making it the largest online game ever attempted. The game was released commercially in Japan where it achieved only a fair amount of success on the market.²



³ Through the late 1980’s, America Online-like online service providers (i.e. “Imagination Network” and “GENie”) maintained their own games online such as “Air Warrior” and “Yserbius” on a pay-per-minute basis for their members. These games were graphics-based and supported around 16 players.⁴ However, technically, these games do not meet the definition of “online game” because they were only available to a specific group of gamers who paid for a certain internet access service, not all people with internet access.

The first game to be open to the internet public and to meet the modern definition of “Massive Multiplayer Online Game” was “Meridian 59”.⁵ Released in 1996, “Meridian 59” was created as the result of a group of software designers who shared the code for the game over the internet and worked together to develop an entirely unheard of platform and game. They were able to found a company, 3DO, with the profits from selling their platform to major corporations Panasonic and Goldstar, which were also working to give the computer game



² Kent, S. “Alternate Reality: The History of Massively Multiplayer Online Games”. GameSpy, September, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week1/>

³ Image Source: www.lemonamiga.com

⁴ Kent, S. “Alternate Reality: The History of Massively Multiplayer Online Games”. GameSpy, September, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week1/>

⁵ Image Source: www.digitalspace.com

industry a facelift. “Meridian 59” designers claim to have coined the term “Massively Multiplayer” and used a 2.5-dimensional graphics interface that had made earlier bestselling games like “DOOM” popular and revolutionary. The game supported up to 250 players on each of 12 servers that hosted the game. “Meridian 59” was the first game to allow players to chat within the game interface, customize and equip their characters’ appearance and weapons, and play from the first-person perspective.⁶

Shortly after the explosion of Meridian 59, Origin Systems developed and released “Ultima Online” in 1997.⁷ Ultima featured a unique, 3-dimensional top-down view of the online world and attracted 200,000 subscribing players. In the Ultima universe, players exist within an in-game economic and social class system. Players complete tasks and salvage objects to gain currency and material



rewards, such as weapons or new garments for their characters. Additionally, Ultima led the way in solving problems that would plague massively multiplayer online games throughout their development. For example, some experienced players would target new players and kill them to rob them of their start-up funds and accessories – game engineers refer to them as “player-killers”.⁸

By early 1998, online multiplayer games had become popular and almost common. Games were starting to be used by corporate sponsors as marketing tools – such as the online multiplayer “Wheel of Fortune” game. Massively Multiplayer games took a great stride forward with the 1999 release of Verant’s (soon to be bought out by Sony Entertainment) “EverQuest”.⁹

Gaining 500,000 subscribers in its first year on the market, EverQuest allows players to play in a 3-dimensional universe that they can view from many perspectives. While the economy and social advancement systems in EverQuest are simpler than those in Ultima, the game’s graphics and the size of the persistent online world players participate in are far superior to

⁶ Kent, S. “Alternate Reality: The History of Massively Multiplayer Online Games”. GameSpy, September, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week1/>

⁷ Image Source: www.aschulze.net

⁸ Kent, S. “Alternate Reality: The History of Massively Multiplayer Online Games”. GameSpy, September, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week1/>

⁹ Kent, S. “Alternate Reality: The History of Massively Multiplayer Online Games”. GameSpy, September, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week1/>

Ultima's. In EverQuest, players fight against both computer-guided and human opponents, explore new lands to find treasures and allies, and develop their characters by advancing through ability levels and creating back-stories and wardrobes. Today, EverQuest has released several expansion packs and remains one of the most popular massively multiplayer online games. The economy of the game even briefly extended into the real world when EBay allowed players to auction off virtual items and advanced character avatars for real-world money.¹⁰

Nine months later, Microsoft announced the debut of its new massively multiplayer online game, "Asheron's Call". Another smaller company called Mythic developed its own massively multiplayer online game, "Dark Age of Camelot". Sony and LucasArts began developing "Star Wars: Galaxies", a "Star Wars"-themed online game. Spurred by the success of Ultima and EverQuest, by the end of 1999, 13 massively multiplayer online games were in development and testing for imminent release.¹¹

¹⁰ Asher, Mark. "2003 MMOs". GameSpy, October, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week4/>

¹¹ Asher, Mark. "2003 MMOs". GameSpy, October, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week4/>

Marketing Online Games and Online Game Economics

The main concern for massively multiplayer online game designers is not attracting a large audience, but attracting a large audience *that remains loyal*. Game companies have repeatedly encountered the same cycle of participation: players eagerly subscribe to games initially but then, as a few months pass, lose interest in (or time for playing) the former game or move on to a new game and cancel their subscription. The average EverQuest player only retains a subscription for 10 months before moving to other games or quitting altogether, according to Sony Online Entertainment. According to Jupiter Research, a firm that studies online games in particular, it costs about \$10-million per year to run an online game, so maintaining a subscriber base is central to keeping games in business.¹²

Online games, at their inception, were not necessarily appealing to large numbers of people. The early games demanded lots of time to play and develop characters (less developed characters were picked off and robbed by stronger ones). As a system of online social stratification developed, newcomers were discouraged by the time and effort required to attain even a modest level of success in the game hierarchies. In 1999, designers grew concerned as games continued to struggle in their effort to become a facet of mainstream entertainment. Designers identify the reasons for the high attrition rates as being the time required to develop a viable online identity and the limited appeal of game subject matter. Most early massively multiplayer online games were based in medieval worlds populated by masculine, heroic knights, “Lord of the Rings”-esque elves, and bikini-clad Amazon warriors – or were founded in science fiction universes of made-up aliens and far away planets.¹³

To bring in new players, games began adding game features that help newcomers ease into the game without fear of being immediately picked off and trying to take on subject matter and settings beyond the “Dungeons and Dragons” theme that dominated the environments and plots of most of the popular games. Many identified sports as a possible extension and, as the Xbox Live video football game “Madden 2007” has proven, sports games are a lucrative venture. Designers also sought to reduce the time commitment required for “leveling up” a character (advancing the character economically and socially). Their hope was that by helping players

¹² Kent, S. “Making an MMOG for the Masses”. GameSpy, October, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week3/index.shtml>

¹³ Kent, S. “Making an MMOG for the Masses”. GameSpy, October, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week3/index.shtml>

continually advance and keep up with their in game and real-life friends in the game universe players would retain subscriptions for longer and become less frustrated.¹⁴

Determining how players are to pay to participate in online games and creating a reasonably priced, but profitable, billing system is an integral part of any game's design. The first online games required players to play through their internet service provider, according to the service provider's billing system (often on a pay-per-minute or –hour system). Games that are more recent include two costs: initially, the price of a copy of the game itself (usually \$30-\$80) as well as a monthly subscription fee (\$5-\$20). Many potential players are discouraged by the monthly fee and are reluctant to sign up for games when they are not sure how much they will really end up playing – actually paying fees, during the early years of online gaming, was considered a “hardcore” gamer activity – only for the most dedicated.¹⁵

Newer games such as “Guild Wars” employ a different kind of billing system. Players pay a one-time fee to gain access to the game's main “continent” – the first available area in the in-game universe. Players explore this initial land, completing quests and tasks, until they have advanced to a point where the continent is no longer challenging for their character. At that time, they may elect to pay a one-time fee to unlock another game area. The system is successful because players are more comfortable with one-time fees than monthly billing and the one-time fee allows them unlimited access to the area for as long as the game exists.¹⁶

¹⁴ Kent, S. “Making an MMOG for the Masses”. GameSpy, October, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week3/index.shtml>

¹⁵ Kent, S. “Making an MMOG for the Masses”. GameSpy, October, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week3/index.shtml>

¹⁶ Kent, S. “Making an MMOG for the Masses”. GameSpy, October, 2003. Online: <http://archive.gamespy.com/amdmmog/week3/index.shtml>

Popular Games

World of Warcraft

World of Warcraft (or “WoW”, as it is more commonly called), is one of the most popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) of all time. A player first customizes a character avatar by choosing from a variety of possible “races” (for example: “undead”, human, “orc”, and others), colors, and clothing styles. Players then appoint their character with a skill set (called a “class”) and enter the online world of Azeroth. Azeroth is an immense 3-dimensional fantasy world.

The game has built-in “quests” that players may complete, or players may take a more free approach to the game by roaming and playing independently or with groups. After exploring the map, interacting with other players, slaying enemies, gaining skills, completing quests, and participating in the online world, characters gain new skills and abilities as they increase in level. Players may also encounter and gain new items that enable them to become more able, powerful, or generate extra “health” to prevent death in combat situations.

The graphical interface of WoW is arguably one of the most beautiful among its competitors. The following are images of characters and settings, captured by players in Azeroth:



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¹⁷ Image source: <http://wow.qj.net/The-Azeroth-party/pg/49/aid/68526>

¹⁸ Image source: <http://www.gamespy.net/>

¹⁹ Image source: <http://warcraft.trei.ro/forum/viewtopic.php?=&p=659>

RuneScape

RuneScape shares many of the same features as *World of Warcraft*. It is played in a large and persistent online world, includes quests, special items, combat, an economy, allows players to choose and develop trades for their characters, and in July, 2006, it was the third most popular MMORPG overall.²⁰ However, the graphics on *RuneScape* are of far inferior quality to those of *World of Warcraft* – and most other MMORPGs, for that matter.

In spite of its visual and technical inferiority, the reason for *RuneScape*'s great success is that it is a free game (subscriptions are optional, but not required – except to access certain areas of the game world) based on simpler software than the bigger-name games. Since *RuneScape* is free and can run on older or simpler computers, it is more versatile and can better accommodate a player's lifestyle (it can be played, for example, on computers provided in offices and schools that do not have the hardware necessary for the flashy graphics more sophisticated games require). *RuneScape* is also a welcome alternative for players who do not want to pay to access their game or have an inconsistent schedule – they do not need to pay subscription fees for time they do not use (or any subscription fees at all, for that matter!).

The following are images captured by *RuneScape* players:



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²⁰ The Massively Multiplayer Online Game Chart. Online:

http://www.mmogchart.com/Chart1_files/Subscriptions_8846_image001.gif

²¹ Image Source: <http://www.mysinglemomlife.com/blog/archives/runescape.jpg>

²² Image Source: <http://planet.nana.co.il/maory3/runescape.bmp>

²³ Image Source: http://www.runescapenewbieguide.com/uploaded_images/runescape_nov2005_mageatadistance-715496.jpg

City of Heroes/Villains



In *City of Heroes* and its sister game, *City of Villains*, players assume the roles of superheroes and super-villains in post-modern Paragon City. Players customize their characters' appearance and abilities and earn new accessories and skills as they gain game experience.

In the plot of the games, the heroes and villains have just discovered their powers and are setting out to make their name known. The game provides them with quests to complete, either alone or in teams, and players take on street thugs, impish sewer monsters, and other foes, as well as each other.

The game is known best for its visual effects. When players use their powers, brilliant, gaudy visuals appear to indicate that waves and splashes of that power are directed towards the foe. Additionally, the world that the players interact in is a well-rendered representation of a real, urban setting. Finally, players enjoy a seemingly infinite range of options in character customization. The costume, coloring, facial, and accessory options for a new character are virtually endless and many players claim to never have seen two identical characters (except when it is intentional).

²⁴ Image source: www.cityofvillains.com

EverQuest II



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The new member of the family for the formerly most popular MMORPG, *Everquest*, *Everquest II* returns players to the fictional world of Norrath. However, the world is now one where good and evil are at battle for territory and to establish dominance. Players enter the world as wandering refugees from a recent disaster and all of the in-game races of players reside in the same city, facilitating greater cooperation and interaction between races that will later help build powerful teams to take on tasks that require diverse skills.

Players complete quests that allow them to gain new items and skills. They may also interact with a number of non-player characters (NPCs) who can guide them through the world and offer advice, or be slain for experience. The NPCs in *Everquest II* are known for their ability to seem human-like in their interaction with players and some players do not entirely believe that they are not conversing with a real human.

²⁵ Image source: www.gameogre.com

²⁶ Image source: www.gamespy.com

²⁷ Image source: www.terrage.com

History of Images of Women in the Media

Online games do not exist in a vacuum. They too are subject to the cultural and social influences of the popular media and, by some, are a part and a contributor to the character of the media. To social scientists, one of the most fascinating features of online game communities to observe is the way real world cultural features come into play in online culture. One of the key issues in real world culture is gender roles and the ways images of women are presented.

The “Thin Ideal”

In 1970, the average age when an American woman would go on her first diet to control or lose weight was fourteen. By 1990, the average age had fallen to eight. Today, eighty-one percent of ten year-olds report having dieted at least once already in their lives. These statistics seem to indicate that something about Americans’ weight has changed. Data from the National Center for Health Statistics indicates that, today, sixteen percent of children are classifiably overweight²⁸ – so to account for the younger American dieters, perhaps the issue is not increased weight, but increased anxiety over weight.

In today’s America, there is a palpable fear among women associated with not looking a certain way – thin. It can be felt in entertainment, in politics, in everyday social discourse, and even in video games. However, where it is most strongly manifested is among school-age American women. According to a recent study, young female Americans are more afraid of becoming fat than they are of losing their parents, nuclear war, or cancer.²⁹ Clearly, if a value has been placed on thinness that overshadows the desire for family, peace and safety, and, possibly most strikingly, one’s own health, determining the root of this cultural phenomenon (and if it is unique to Americans) is a priority in ensuring the development of a healthy generation of young women.

In the current middle-aged generation, there is evidence for the impact of the thinness phenomenon. Numerous studies have shown that adult women today frequently overestimate the size of their own bodies, though they can correctly estimate the size of other objects with great

²⁸ National Center for Health Statistics. E-Stats “Prevalence of Overweight among Children and Adolescents: United States”. <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/pubs/pubd/hestats/overwght99.htm>. Accessed 12/3/2006.

²⁹ Wellness Student Group at the University of Colorado. “Body Image – Shocking Statistics”. <http://www.colorado.edu/StudentGroups/wellness/NewSite/BdyImgShockingStats.html>. Accessed 11/16/2006.

precision.³⁰ Women's perceptions of their own bodies, size, and shape, are distorted, while their set of visual-spatial abilities, apparently, is intact. This may be related to another study's finding that the majority of adult women (seventy-four percent) identify ideal body shapes that are an unhealthy ten to twenty percent underweight.³¹ If women identify ideal figures that are significantly smaller than the average-sized, healthy adult woman, then they view their own size in comparison to their image of the ideal. The concept of defining extreme thinness as an artificial physical norm and judging oneself against it is encapsulated in the concept of the "thin ideal," developed by social scientists and psychologists.

The "thin ideal" is an internalized psychosocial construct that values thinness over all other qualities. Someone who internalizes the thin ideal holds strongly to the belief that thinness is an appropriate personal goal and an acceptable standard by which to judge other people. Instead of striving to maintain a healthy body size and weight, a person who strives for the thin ideal will seek to be many pounds underweight – so underweight as to be noticed as such by others.

The thin ideal is strongly correlated with high incidences of disordered eating and other pathological weight control practices. Those who subscribe to the thin ideal believe that they are admired and valued more highly socially for their thinness, and even those who are clinically underweight will indicate that they would be more satisfied with their bodies if they could lose just a few more pounds.³²

Studies have shown that those who place a high value on thinness become prejudiced and develop strong feelings towards fatness. Included in the internalization of the thin ideal is the association of negative qualities with fatness and positive qualities with the absence of fat. Someone who subscribes to the thin ideal will often indicate that believe that overweight people and people who do not take measures to control their weight are lazy, irresponsible, or are trying to act out and draw negative attention. They believe that thinness represents self-control, strength of character, and power. In the mind of a person invested in thinness, the body is the enemy and the mind is the weapon with which to fight the body and its apparent dominance over one's need for food, which is perceived as a hazard to one's struggle for outward physical beauty. Thin

³⁰ Myers, P.N., Biocca, F.A. "The elastic body image: The effect of television advertising and programming on body image distortions in young women". *Journal of Communication*. 1992; Vol. 42, No. 3.

³¹ Wellness Student Group at the University of Colorado. "Body Image – Shocking Statistics". <http://www.colorado.edu/StudentGroups/wellness/NewSite/BdyImgShockingStats.html>. Accessed 11/16/2006.

³² O Dea, Jenny. "Fed: Curves are back in vogue, women's body image on the mend". *AAP General News Wire*. Sydney: August 18, 2005. pg. 1.

people are to be admired, according to those who strive for thinness, as they have taken control of their bodies and have dominated their need for food. The excessively thin are viewed as role models and looked to for inspiration to keep pushing one's mind to quell the needs of one's body and continue the struggle against fat.³³

³³ Ahern & Hetherington. "The Thin Ideal and Body Image: An Experimental Study of Implicit Attitudes". *Psychology of Addictive Behavior*. 2006, Vol. 20, No. 3, 338-342.

Body Image and World Culture

The problem of women with unrealistic expectations of their bodies is not limited to the United States. While women from other countries have historically been seen to have better body image than women in the United States, in the past decade, women in other nations have been shown to acquire the same body image concerns as American women – in rapidly increasing numbers. In a 2005 study 2% of all the women in the world describe themselves as “beautiful”.³⁴

The low self-image this study observes is more prevalent in countries with greater cultural similarity to the United States. In Japan, for example, women are significantly more likely to rate themselves as less attractive than other women. Only 1% of Japanese women describe themselves as “beautiful”. In the United States, only 3% of women describe themselves as beautiful.³⁵

Interestingly, one of the features that American and Japanese culture share is trends in their popular media. Japan is an avid recipient of exported United States media – as evidenced by the fact that *Baywatch* and *Jerry Springer* maintained high ranks in Japanese television ratings throughout the 90’s.³⁶

Both shows present unrealistic, sometimes absurd, images of women. While *Baywatch* is known for its portrayal of surgically enhanced, scantily clad young women jogging in slow motion, *Jerry Springer* is best known for its ability to bring out the worst in its guests, particularly the female ones. It is not uncommon for a female *Springer* participant to reveal her breasts as a show of dominance over another female, for an unattractive, unintelligent male to admit to sleeping with two or more women, and for a man to bring a fat wife or female partner on television to tell her he is leaving her for a younger, thinner woman. In other words, *Jerry Springer* is not best known for his fair and respectful portrayal of women.

It is unfortunate that these particular representations of American popular culture are the ones most prevalent around the world; however, it also speaks loudly to the growing acceptability of the messages implicit in the programs. America’s broadcasting of idealized images of women, enjoying being treated like sex objects and using their bodies instead of their

³⁴ Etcoff, N. et al. “The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report. Findings on the Global Study of Women, Beauty, and Well-Being”. http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/uploadedfiles/dove_white_paper_final.pdf. Accessed 11/16/2006. Page 10.

³⁵ Etcoff, N. et al. “The Real Truth About Beauty: A Global Report. Findings on the Global Study of Women, Beauty, and Well-Being”. http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/uploadedfiles/dove_white_paper_final.pdf. Accessed 11/16/2006. Page 14.

³⁶ Petersen, Martin. “The Challenge for a Political Analyst”. *Studies in Intelligence*. <https://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/vol47no1/article05.html>. Accessed 12/3/2006.

minds to attract life partners, presents a distortion of reality that for some reason seems quite palatable to the majority of viewers, Japanese and American alike (and not only the males).

Body Image, the Media, and Ethnicity

There is little question that the fashion industry has always been at the forefront when it comes to presenting unrealistic, distorted images of women. The rise of the “heroin chic” look through the five decades leading up to the nineties in the fashion industry parallels the observed decline in women’s body image.

The discrepancy between the size of the average fashion model and the average woman is startling. Today, while the average woman in the United States is five feet, four inches tall and weighs 140 pounds, the average United States fashion model is five feet, eleven inches tall and weighs 117 pounds. While 140 pounds is at the high end (but not outside) of the healthy weight range for a 5’4” woman, 117 pounds is nearly twenty pounds below the bottom of the healthy weight range for a 5’11” woman.³⁷ As reported earlier in this paper, women identify ideal figures that are ten to twenty percent underweight – perhaps images of these models are where that ideal stems from.

However, the way models are presented and the way they actually look are quite drastically different. A short Internet film by the Dove Corporation’s Campaign for Real Beauty uses an average woman to reveal in fast forward the processes any woman can undergo to appear in a photo that is glamorous and idealized, though it looks nothing like the original. The film pauses to emphasize that the makeup that is applied to her face, ears, and neck is not even close to the natural color of her skin. It also spends a majority of its time documenting every alteration that is digitally made to the woman’s image, including reducing the width of her cheeks, lengthening her neck to nearly twice its real length, plumping her lips, shading over her freckles and acne scars, and raising her eyebrows (and widening her eyes).³⁸ The film seeks to prove the point that not only are the images of beauty used by advertisers attainable for any woman (through roundabout means - and never in reality) but that the images of beauty so popular in society are not accurate representations of reality. The film seeks to show that images of beauty shown by the media and advertisers represent the result of distortion and deception, often in the interest of selling a product by creating a new “need” or standard of attractiveness that requires the use of that product, *not* the work of nature on some certain “lucky” women.

³⁷ FirstGOV for Consumers. “Partnership for Healthy Weight Management - Body Mass Index Chart”. <http://www.consumer.gov/weightloss/bmi.htm>. Accessed 12/3/2006.

³⁸ Dove Campaign for Real Beauty. “Evolution”. Online film. <http://www.campaignforrealbeauty.com/>. Accessed 12/3/2006.

While, at first, so-called “*perfectly thin*” images were limited to the fashion industry, in spite of public disapproval of the image by prominent social and cultural figures including President Bill Clinton,³⁹ other fields of the media have since incorporated the thin ideal. Although it seems intuitive to many authors that the thin ideal would be generally rejected for its unrealistic and unattainable presentation of women, its widespread acceptance indicates that perhaps society does not fully understand what this thinness really means.

The displays of excessive dieting, exercise, and weight management behavior, as well as the physical and psychological health problems associated with thinness are often underrepresented by the media. The weight control measures most commonly shown in popular media are miraculous quick fix diets, exercise regimes, and medications. The reality of attaining thinness includes severe and stringent dieting that excludes most foods, life-consuming exercise regimes, and the use of chemicals (including hazardous substances such as cigarettes, cocaine, and drugs such as prescription antidepressants) to mitigate the body’s biological need for food.⁴⁰ However, the figures and people who result from these behaviors receive extra attention for their changing appearances.

One example of this phenomenon is Oprah Winfrey. A popular talk show host and prominent African American figure in mainstream white culture, respected for her intelligence and willingness to tackle issues that are meaningful to women, as well as her positive representation of black women, Oprah publicly celebrated losing much of the weight she was known for in the late nineties. Oprah has since publicized her weight loss plan (though she has not revealed her reflections on how she felt throughout the process, making her transformation appear somewhat effortless) and has become a representative for weight loss with the goal of thinness for health and strength, rather than unhealthy thinness for appearances only. The thinner Oprah remains a positive representative of women and the black community, but some argue that she is now role modeling the wrong attitude towards her body and size. Her emergence as a spokeswoman for weight loss betrays the value traditionally placed on accepting one’s curves in

³⁹ Anxiety, Addiction, and Depression Treatments Online. “Debate Over Media and Body Image Continues”. <http://www.treatmentonline.com/treatments.php?id=941>. Accessed 11/16/2006.

⁴⁰ Rabak-Wagener, J. et al. “The effect of media analysis on attitudes and behaviors regarding body image among college students”. *Journal of American College Health*. 1998: Vol. 47 No. 1; pgs. 29-35.

black culture and, some say, shows a great deal of conformity to ideals that are contradictory to black values.⁴¹

Before the 1990's, women from non-white ethnicities were shown by psychological and social studies to be immune to the body image concerns that plague white women. In fact, for much of the century, eating disorders were considered a "white women's disease". However, during the 90s, women of color began showing increased incidences of disordered body image. Increases in eating disorders and negative self-image were shown in many ethnic minorities in the United States.

Subsequent studies have shown that the shift toward negative self-image is a side effect of a perceived need to assimilate to white culture. Studies done during the 90's revealed that women of color associate increased social, vocational, and economic opportunity to conforming to mainstream white culture.⁴² Included in mainstream white culture is the unabashed embrace of the thin ideal as the true image of beauty. Even in the past five years alone, there has been a significant increase in dieting and weight control behavior in African-American celebrities, including Janet Jackson and Toni Braxton, as well as Oprah's notorious weight fluctuations.⁴³

While the American ideal of beauty has done damage around the world and within ethnic communities, no group has been more impacted by the media's unrealistic and often unfair portrayal of beauty than young women. American adolescents are the most avid consumers of American television. Additionally, many access mainstream culture through magazines, toys, and "teen" literature. They learn and develop expectations for themselves, their interactions with others, and appropriate gender roles through what they observe in the media. In a media so infested with messages of thinness, it is no surprise that children's self-esteem today is so low.

⁴¹ Cogan, J.C. et al. "A comparison study of United States and African students on perceptions of obesity and thinness". *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. 1996; Vol. 27, No.1; pgs. 98-113.

⁴² Warren, C. et al. "Ethnicity as a Protective Factor against Internalization of a Thin Ideal and Body Dissatisfaction". *International Journal of Eating Disorders*; 2005, 37; 3, pgs. 241-249.

⁴³ Wellness Student Group at the University of Colorado. "Body Image – Shocking Statistics". <http://www.colorado.edu/StudentGroups/wellness/NewSite/BdyImgShockingStats.html>. Accessed 11/16/2006.

Youth & the Media: Television Images

By the time they are fifteen years old, the average American child will spend more time watching television than time spent in school. American children will spend three hours every day watching television and less than one hour doing homework and studying.⁴⁴ In sixty-three percent of American households, families leave the television on during family dinner. While some argue that children watching television with parental supervision is the solution to preventing exposure to potentially damaging material, the majority of American parents do not seem to be seeking to exercise this control. Sixty-eight percent of American adolescents (ages eight to eighteen years) have their own television in their bedroom where they can watch at any hour of the day, unsupervised.⁴⁵ In spite of V-chips and other parental controls that come built in to many new televisions, children today often have nearly unrestricted access to television programming and its sometimes-inappropriate content.

One of the side effects of children viewing television without supervision is the common occurrence of children adopting inappropriate television character role models. Studies have shown that teenagers frequently respond positively to television characters and seek to be more like them. In a survey of teenage girls, seven out of ten reported that there is a specific television character who they would like to look like.⁴⁶ This statistic is particularly shocking in light of the fact that research on television actresses has shown that sixty-nine percent of female television figures are thin or underweight. Only five percent are overweight. This leaves less than a fourth of television characters representing an average or healthy size.⁴⁷ Of the girls who wanted to look like a television character, thirty-one percent had taken small steps to change their appearance (i.e. haircuts and wardrobe selections). Sixteen percent had begun dieting or exercising to change their appearance.⁴⁸

The genres of television that have the greatest effect on promoting girls and women to develop a desire for thinness are soap operas and music videos.⁴⁹ While soap operas are less likely to reach the younger audience, music videos are a favorite among teenagers. Youth-

⁴⁴ Hoberman, H. "Study group report on the impact of television violence on adolescents". *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*. 1990; v.11: 45-49.

⁴⁵ Roberts, D. F. "Adolescents and the mass media: From 'Leave it to Beaver' to 'Beverly Hills 90210'". *Teachers College Record*. 1993: 94 (3), 629-644.

⁴⁶ Silverstein, B., Perdue, L., Peterson, B., & Kelly, E. "The role of the mass media in promoting a thin standard of bodily attractiveness for women." *Sex Roles*. 1986: Vol.14 pgs. 9-10.

⁴⁷ Becker, A. E., & Hamburg, P. "Culture, the media, and eating disorders". *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*. 1996: 4.

⁴⁸ Silverstein, B., Perdue, L., Peterson, B., & Kelly, E. "The role of the mass media in promoting a thin standard of bodily attractiveness for women." *Sex Roles*. 1986: Vol.14 pgs. 9-10.

⁴⁹ Harrison, K. & Cantor, J. "The relationship between media consumption and eating disorders". *Journal of Communication*. 1997: Vol. 47, No 1.

oriented networks such as MTV and its spin-off channels (MTV Latino, MTV Classic, etc.) capitalize on advertising and marketing to the youth demographic and display music videos (instead of paying to produce programming) in order to snare viewers with a view of their favorite artist (often surrounded by scantily clad, dancing women). Additionally, music videos may be more popular among young people because they do not demand attention for extended periods. Young people can use music videos much like a radio while they study – paying attention when they like what is broadcast and ignoring what they do not like.

In addition to promoting body dissatisfaction, television has proven repeatedly to be a poor role model for young adults. Of the most watched shows by teens, seventy percent contain sexual content. While producers claim that they are simply supplying their audience with what their viewership indicates they like to see most (mainly, flagrant displays of teen sexuality), they tend to shy away from addressing the fact that they are promoting unrealistic images and expectations about sexual activity and sexual behavior.

Of course, even if a teen were to avoid sex-oriented adolescent programming, it is unlikely that the youth could avoid sexuality all together on television. Across the board, including news and sports, one out of every nine television shows contains sexual content.⁵⁰ While the definition of “sexual content” this particular study used is not available, it is undeniable that sex is an omnipresent force in even the most innocuous television broadcasts (such as the morning news).

Also notable is the fact that television displays an average of five violent acts per hour. In one year, the average American youth (ages five through fifteen years) will witness 180,000 acts of violence, including murders, rapes, armed robberies, and aggravated assaults. While one in eleven primetime television shows contains violence, it is perhaps most disappointing to note that the most violent hours of television are Saturday morning cartoons.⁵¹ Although there is discrepancy within the psychological community over whether children internalize and act on the violence they observe on television, surely seeing this many violent acts must have *some* impact on a developing mind’s worldview.

In addition to the messages children receive from the programs they view, children see an average of 40,000 television commercials a year. One out of every eleven television commercials

⁵⁰ Signorielli, Nancy. “Drinking, sex, and violence on television: The Cultural Indicators perspective”. *Journal of Drug Education*, 1987, V. 17, No. 3:245-260.

⁵¹ Signorielli, Nancy. “Drinking, sex, and violence on television: The Cultural Indicators perspective”. *Journal of Drug Education*, 1987, V. 17, No. 3:245-260.

contains a direct message about beauty (i.e. “you need this if you want to be beautiful/happy/successful/attractive to the opposite sex - like this model”). In a 2005 study by Dittmar and her colleagues, Dittmar showed that, in teenage women, exposure to advertisements depicting thin women causes body image to decline. Greater declines in the study’s subjects’ self-evaluations of their body image was correlated with greater exposure time to the images.⁵² In other words, the longer young women observed the advertisements, the worse they felt about themselves. If young women internalize the images of beauty they see, what else do they learn from television? In light of this question, it is disturbing to consider that, in one year, a child will see over 2,000 advertisements for beer.⁵³

⁵² Dittmar, A. et al. “Think ‘Thin’ and Feel Bad: the Role of Appearance Schema Activation, Attention Level, and Thin-Ideal Internalization for Young Women’s Responses to Ultra-Thin Media Ideals”. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*. December, 2005; 24, 8; Psychology Module.

⁵³ Signorielli, Nancy. “Drinking, sex, and violence on television: The Cultural Indicators perspective”. *Journal of Drug Education*, 1987, V. 17, No. 3:245-260.

Youth & the Media: Magazines

In addition to television, young American women consume an exceptional amount of print media in the form of “teen” magazines. A 2004 study by Morrison and his colleagues revealed that the majority of these magazines display idealized body imagery and encourage readers to engage in self-comparison to ideals (for example, “are you the perfect date?” “how to get hair like Lindsay Lohan’s”). He tested the effects of exposure to idealized body imagery and encouraged self-comparison to ideals and found that increased exposure predicts a girl’s developing low self-esteem, pursuing diets, expressing dissatisfaction with her body, and engaging in pathogenic weight control practices.⁵⁴

In *Seventeen*, the most read magazine by teenage women⁵⁵, the majority of the pages are devoted to articles about appearance change and advice on how to make one’s appearance more attractive.⁵⁶ In a study of Stanford undergraduates, women who viewed teenage and women’s magazines felt worse about their bodies and engaged in more detrimental self-comparison to other women after reading the magazines. In contrast to the stated goal of many teen women’s magazines – to empower women to feel good about themselves – it seems that the magazines have the opposite effect. Exposure to magazines increases awareness of one’s own flaws and while the magazines offer solutions to remedy the perceived imperfection, the magazine offers little comfort for those who do not have “the perfect lips” or who cannot spend hours a day grooming in order to have “Lindsay Lohan’s hair”. The women observed in the study’s self-reported self-esteem declined an average of 15% after even casual exposure to the magazines.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Morrison, T. et al. “Body-image evaluation and body-image investment among adolescents: a test of sociocultural and social comparison theories”. *Adolescence*. Fall, 2004; Vol. 35, No. 155, pgs. 571-592.

⁵⁵ Merskin, Debra. “Teen magazines play important role in adolescent girls’ lives”. *Flash*. Spring/Summer, 2001; Vol. 16, No. 3.

⁵⁶ Peirce, K. “A feminist perspective on the socialization of teenage girls through *Seventeen* magazine”. *Sex Roles*. 1990; Vol. 21, No. 9, 491-500.

⁵⁷ Anderson, A. E., & DiDomenico, L. “Diet vs. shape content of popular male and female magazines: A dose-response relationship to the incidence of eating disorders?” *International Journal of Eating Disorders*. 1992; Vol. 11, No. 3; pgs. 283-287.

“MMORPGs” - Today’s Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games

As women are becoming increasingly present in the online community, it is important to examine the ways in which the real-world media images of women manifest themselves in the online game world. Examining the ways women participate in online games and the images of women that are presented in these games provides a basis for comparison between the real world and the online world, and a place to start in exploring online gender equity.

Player Demographics

Today, participating in video games is something of a social norm. Sixty-nine percent of American households play video or computer games and, of these households, fifty-three percent are expected to spend as much or more time playing ten years from now. The average gamer is thirty-three years old (44% of gamers are between eighteen and forty-nine years of age), while 31% of games are below the age of eighteen. Adults over age fifty make up a rather significant portion of the gamer population as well – ¼ of all gamers are age fifty and over.⁵⁸

Of all online gamers, 48% are male and 42% are female, however statistics for individual games may vary.⁵⁹ For example, *World of Warcraft*, one of the most popular MMORPG’s in history, is heavily male-dominated with a subscriber base that is 84% male.⁶⁰ The majority of male online gamers are between ages 12 and 28, while the majority of female players are between ages 23 and 40.⁶¹ This vast age difference between the genders hints at the social stigma that young women encounter trying to engage the online gaming community, which will later be discussed in detail.

Gamers tend to be students, homemakers, or unemployed – 36.2% of gamers fall into one of these groups. In examining gamers’ income levels, 15.8% make less than \$25,000 annually and 18.8% make between \$25,000 and \$39,000 per year – these two groups are the next largest after students, homemakers, and the unemployed. 11.1% of gamers make between \$40,000 and

⁵⁸ The Entertainment Software Association. “Facts and Research – Game Player Data”. Online: http://www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php

⁵⁹ The Entertainment Software Association. “Facts and Research – Game Player Data”. Online: http://www.theesa.com/facts/gamer_data.php

⁶⁰ Yee, N. “Most Important Aspect of the Game”, The Daedalus Project. January, 2003. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000192.php>

⁶¹ Yee, N. “Gender and Age Distribution”, The Daedalus Project. January, 2003. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000194.php>

\$54,000 annually, 7.2% make between \$55,000 and \$69,000 per year, and 6.1% of gamers make between \$70,000 and \$99,000 per year. Only 3.1% of gamers make more than \$100,000 per year.⁶²

Research shows that gamers play most often to make friends (34% of gamers identify this as the most important aspect of the game). Of this 34%, it was females who selected “making friends” as their highest priority most (about 50% of women identified it as such, while only 32% of males did so). Of female players, 59.9% reported having made more than 3 “good” friends in an online gaming environment, as did 74.6% of male players. The next most popular reasons to play are to engage and make progress in the plot of the online game (16.2%) and to vent and relieve stress (11.6%).⁶³

⁶² Yee, N. “Education and Income”, The Daedalus Project. February, 2003. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000340.php>

⁶³ Yee, N. “Most Important Aspect of the Game”, The Daedalus Project. January, 2003. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000192.php>

Women & Gaming

A Brief History of Female Game Characters

In video games, players are exposed to thinness idealization and chauvinist treatment of women. In 41% of video games (including computer games, console games, and arcade games), there are no female characters. In the 59% of video games that *do* contain female characters, 28% of the games' females are portrayed exclusively as sex objects. In 21% of the games, players are encouraged to act violently toward the female characters.⁶⁴

Female video game characters are often blatantly hyper-feminine beauties. Here are some images of popular female video game characters:

Lara Croft from the *Tomb Raider* series (who was portrayed by Angelina Jolie in the movies by the same title):



65

“BloodRayne”, from the games (and movie and comic book) by the same name:

⁶⁴ Dietz, Tracy L. “An examination of violence and gender role portrayals in video games: Implications for gender socialization and aggressive behavior”. *Sex Roles*. 1998; Vol. 38, No. 5; 425-442.

⁶⁵ Image Source: http://www.jucaushii.ro/images/news/LaraCroft_new-look.gif



The female figure used in advertising for *EverQuest*:



As evidenced in the previous images, women in games are often portrayed somewhat differently from the way real women look. They are thin, buxom (and often have the majority of their breasts exposed or bursting out of tight clothing), have waists that are extremely small, and

⁶⁶ Image Source: <http://www.bloodrayne2.com/images/br1.jpg>

⁶⁷ Image Source: <http://www.gametab.com/images/ss/pc/3557/box-1.jpg>

carry weapons. They rarely choose to sport clothing that is optimal for combat and negotiating tight spaces, opting for short shorts, skin-tight leotards, and long flowing capes. Their skinny, goddess-like appearances only serve to reinforce the thin idealization discussed above.

Game designers realize just what sort of monsters they have created. In 2003, game designers began contributing art to Playboy Magazine to be used in the annual “Women of Video Games” feature. The computer-generated images were featured in Playboy magazine every year since then. This year, six women were selected, instead of the usual one. The final “group photo” appears below (censored):



Fortunately, no MMORPGs have contributed to the Playboy spread... yet (perhaps because players themselves are the ones who ultimately shape the appearance of their character). Whether or not they contribute in the future will be a true test of the integrity of the online game industry.

⁶⁸ Image source: <http://www.playboy.com/> (censored by Christine Wagner)

Online “Life”



(A screenshot captured by an MMORPG player depicting an in-game advertisement)

While the real-world media does have a habit of infiltrating online games (as demonstrated in the image above, game developers have recently begun selling in-game ad space), the online world has a culture all its own.

Gamer Conduct and Online Community Standards

One of the unique features of online communities (and one of the most disturbing) is the anonymity they offer members. In an online community, participants may represent themselves any way they choose, and they are likely to never meet any of their online compatriots in the “real world”. If they effectively conceal personal information (such as their real names and addresses), there is no way their assertions about their identities (true or false) can be proven wrong or even reasonably doubted.

In the online world, there is a significant amount of what some would describe as “dishonesty” and others might call “freedom”. Men may engage the community as female and females may choose to appear male or even take on a male persona. Online gender bending can

⁶⁹ Image source: www.tentonhammer.com

range from simply choosing an opposite-gender avatar (in-game character) and openly admitting to one's true gender, to entire lives as members of the opposite gender.

A study by the Daedalus Project revealed the gender bending habits of *World of Warcraft* ("WoW") players. In the real world, 86% of WoW players are male and 16% of the players are female. In the game, 65% of characters are male and 35% are female.⁷⁰

The difference in online gender demographics and real world demographics is due to members of both genders crossing over. Of the female characters one encounters on *World of Warcraft*, one out of every two will be played by a man⁷¹ – though he will not always choose to admit to his male identity when questioned. Of male characters, one out of every hundred one encounters will be played by a female – significantly fewer than cross from male to female. On *World of Warcraft*, male players are nearly eight times more likely to gender bend than females.⁷²

Examining online forum conversations between gamers regarding gender bending, certain themes emerge in discussions of motivations for playing as the opposite gender. One male player remarks that he only plays females because they take up less space on the screen and allow him to view more of the action in the game. On a similar note, a gamer who posted under the identity, "Mike", quipped about playing as a female, "If I am going to stare at a butt all game it might as well be a butt I'd like to look at".⁷³

Nick Yee, a prominent researcher on online gamer culture, offers a few explanations for the prevalence of online gender bending as well. One includes men using traditional chauvinist perceptions about women (i.e. they are weaker, more vulnerable, deserve special treatment) to their advantage and to take advantage of other players. Another possible explanation explores how masculinity is over-valued in real life and the popular media and posits that men may use their online anonymity to break free of gender roles that may confine their behavior in the real world.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Yee, N. "WoW Gender Bending", The Daedalus Project. July, 2005. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001369.php>

⁷¹ Yee, N. "WoW Gender Bending", The Daedalus Project. July, 2005. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001369.php>

⁷² Yee, N. "WoW Gender Bending", The Daedalus Project. July, 2005. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001369.php>

⁷³ Yee, N. "WoW Gender Bending – Comment Forum", The Daedalus Project. July, 2005. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001369.php>

⁷⁴ Yee, N. "The Demographics of Gender Bending", The Daedalus Project. September, 2003. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000551.php?page=2>

Given the opportunity to respond to Yee's findings, one anonymous gamer in a public forum noted Yee's finding that men above age 35 were more likely than younger men to gender bend online. This gamer suggested that younger gamers may be using the online world as a way to "cruise" for females to form online (and maybe even someday, real world) relationships with. The reluctance of younger gamers to cross gender boundaries may go hand-in-hand with their hope of finding a partner and a meaningful relationship with a member of the opposite sex online.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Yee, N. "The Demographics of Gender Bending – Comment Forum", The Daedalus Project. September, 2003. Online: <http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/000551.php?page=2>

Alternative Lifestyles in Gaming

Within gaming culture, there is a significant gay community. Groups hosted at www.gaymer.org and Gamers.Experimentations.org. Within games, gay gamers create “guilds” (like teams or clubs of players loyal to one group). Popular games such as *City of Heroes*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, and *World of Warcraft* are home to numerous gay groups.

However, gaming culture retains both latent and active homophobia. Many players in the gamer community use the terms “gay” or “homo” (or other less accepted terms) to insult other players in the game. Some gamers speculate that players take advantage of the anonymity of online communities to behave in ways they are not supposed to in the real world.⁷⁶

The gaming community’s response to gay gaming communities has not been overwhelmingly supportive. When the GLBT and GLBT-Friendly *World of Warcraft* guild, “Alter-natives”, was advertised first on *World of Warcraft* in-game chat servers (where it is appropriate for guilds to advertise for members), a moderator for Blizzard, the company that owns and operates *WoW*, cited the guild’s creator for sexual orientation-based harassment. The company held that advertising one’s real-world sexual orientation within the context of the game is inappropriate. They also noted that some players find the word “homosexual” offensive and that advertising that a group of gay players existed was not likely to *reduce* the amount of harassment directed towards the gay community.⁷⁷

Gay gamers have responded to Blizzard’s citation in an uproar. They compare Blizzard’s policy to the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” rule and find it absurd that homosexuality appears in all other media (music, television, movies, etc) but it not be allowed to be a factor in gaming. Some even felt that Blizzard was trying to send the message that gay gamers were not welcome in the community.⁷⁸

The Gaymers contacted Lambda Legal, a gay rights defense legal group, and took on Blizzard in the courtroom. Blizzard apologized to the guild leader who had received the citation and announced it would be requiring its in-game moderators (of whom there are more than 1,000) undergo sensitivity training. Also, Blizzard’s spokespeople announced that the “terms of use”,

⁷⁶ Vargas, JA. “For Gay Gamers, A Virtual Reality Check; They Can Create New Identities Online, But Prejudice Still Has A Role to Play”, The Washington Post. Washington, D.C.: March 11, 2006, pg. C.01.

⁷⁷ Vargas, JA. “For Gay Gamers, A Virtual Reality Check; They Can Create New Identities Online, But Prejudice Still Has A Role to Play”, The Washington Post. Washington, D.C.: March 11, 2006, pg. C.01.

⁷⁸ Vargas, JA. “For Gay Gamers, A Virtual Reality Check; They Can Create New Identities Online, But Prejudice Still Has A Role to Play”, The Washington Post. Washington, D.C.: March 11, 2006, pg. C.01.

the document containing all of the rules for the game and for player interaction, would be reviewed immediately to ensure that this sort of incident does not occur again.⁷⁹

In contrast to the perceived homophobia of the MMORPG communities is *The Sims 2*, a popular online game that is intended as a role-playing game, but generally devolves into a highly social community with little focus on the aims of the game (and is therefore generally excluded from the classification “MMORPG”). *The Sims 2* is frequently questioned for perhaps being *too* liberal in the ways players can interact. The game allows players to navigate a virtual world with avatars that represent real person-like creatures (called “Sims”) in a virtual world based heavily on the real world. Players can engage in everything from the mundane (such as cooking or cleaning) to being abducted by aliens or building explosive lawn gnomes. Players also may develop relationships between their characters that lead to best friends, archenemies, romance, sex, and even marriage.

Sims may develop these relationships with whomever they please, including Sims of the same sex. In fact, from a player’s standpoint, sometimes developing gay relationships is easier because the characters will share more of the same interests and be more willing to spend time together.

⁷⁹ Vargas, JA. “For Gay Gamers, A Virtual Reality Check; They Can Create New Identities Online, But Prejudice Still Has A Role to Play”, *The Washington Post*. Washington, D.C.: March 11, 2006, pg. C.01.

Survey Results & Discussion

The results of the online gamer survey show some interesting trends not observed yet in the Daedalus Project's extensive body of research. To review the text of the survey, please consult the Research Methodology section.

Results:

Basic Demographics & Habits of Survey Respondents

In total, survey respondents were 77.97% male and 12.03% female. The survey respondents were young gamers, ages 18-20 years (69.49%) and 21-25 years (30.51%).

A majority of male respondents played games for 0-5 hours per week (32.61%), followed closely by the next-largest group of male respondents who played for 6-10 hours per week (23.91%). Interestingly, 3 male respondents indicated that they play for more than 50 hours per week (6.52%), with 2 playing more than 60 hours weekly. Male respondents tend to focus on 3 or fewer games at a time (93.33%). Most males indicated that they had been playing the game they play most often for 2 or fewer years (60.96%).

Female respondents also indicated that they played games for 0-5 hours per week (33.33%), or 6-10 hours per week (33.33%). Few females indicated that they play more than 10 hours weekly: 8.33% reported they play for 31-35 hours and 8.33% reported that they play for 41-45 hours weekly. Females focused on 2 or fewer games at a time (91.67%). Females indicated that they had been playing the game they played most often for less than 2.5 years (72.73%).

Survey Respondent Gender Bending Experience

Of the total respondents, 53.85% indicated that they had played as a character of the opposite gender. A majority (60.71%) of the players who had played as the opposite gender reported feeling like other players treated them differently. All players were asked if they had ever seen other players treating each other differently because of gender and 78.43% indicated that they had. However, only 25.41% felt that treating others differently because of gender was appropriate (45.10% reported that they felt it was inappropriate and 25.49% responded that they were not sure how they felt about it).

Male respondents were evenly split between those who had played as the opposite gender and those who had not (53.66% had done so while 46.34% had not). Of those who had played as a female character, 59.09% reported that they had been treated differently by other players while doing so. Of those who felt others had treated them differently, the most commonly observed difference was the other players' generosity in sharing resources (69.23% had observed more than usually generous male compatriots). Others observed that other players were generally more congenial and that they were more often aided in combat by other players when they played as female.

Most male respondents had experienced players treating each other differently because of gender (80% had observed or experienced differential treatment). Most males agreed that treating other players differently because of their gender was inappropriate (45%), while some believed it was appropriate (30%) and others remained unsure (25%).

Female respondents were also evenly split between those who had played as males and those who had not (54.55% had done so and 45.45% had not). Of the women who had played as men, 66.66% reported that they felt players had treated them differently when they were appearing as men. Most women who had observed differential treatment indicated that others had been less generous sharing resources (33.33%), more pleasant and congenial (33.33%), and less helpful in combat situations (33.33%).

Most female respondents had observed players treating others differently because of gender (72.73%). A majority of females agreed that it is inappropriate to treat others differently because of gender (45.45%), while 27.27% felt it is appropriate to do so and 27.27% were not sure.

Survey Respondent Insult Data

The most popular insult word among the gamers surveyed was “noob,” (or “newbie” or “n00b”) a word which, in the gamer language (known as “1337” or “Leet”, derived from “Elite”), is used to describe an inexperienced or unskilled player. Many gamers also indicated an affinity for the words “asshole” (11.42%) and “camper” (a term used to describe someone who unethically stakes out resources in the game, 9.13%). Some players indicated that they preferred to avoid race- and gender-based insult words and instead opted for sophisticated, long-winded insults that, in their words, “cause most people to pause, giving me more time to compile an argument.” “Douche” (8.68%), “jerk” (5.94%), and “retard” (4.57%) were also favored by gamers.

Many players indicated using the gender-based insults, “pussy”, “whore”, and “bitch”. Of these, “bitch” was most popular (8.68%). “Whore” was second with 5.48% of gamers reporting using the word. Only 4.57% of gamers reported using “pussy”.

Of the sexual-orientation-based words, “gay” and “fag” were most popular. Both were used by 3.20% of the gamers surveyed. “Queer” and “homo” were both used by 1.37% of the gamers surveyed.

Examining male respondents specifically, “noob” and “asshole” remained most popular (used 11.89% of gamers and 11.32% of gamers, respectively). Men were more prone to using the gender-based insults, “pussy”, “whore” and “bitch” (21.09% total), than they were to using the sexual-orientation-based insults, “gay”, “fag”, “homo”, and “queer” (10.8% total).

Men also supplied some slightly disturbing responses when given the option of filling in an insult not on the list of choices. Popular among males were, “cunt” and “fucker”. One male supplied “nigger” and another offered “pedophile” and “rape victim”. Two males reported trying to avoid “mainstream” insults in general, opting for more game-oriented words, such as “troll”, defined by one respondent as: An online participant whose purpose for participating in a discussion is to create argument and outrage.

Women’s responses did not differ much from men in terms of the most popular insults. Women also preferred “noob” (17.65%), and also favored “asshole” and “jerk” (11.76% for both). Women were more prone to using the gender-based insults, “pussy”, “whore”, and “bitch” (5.88% total) than the sexual-orientation-based insults, “gay”, “fag”, “homo”, and “queer” (0%). Women’s self-supplied responses were gentle (for example, “dork”), and many reported not insulting other players at all, for fear of being cited for inappropriate conduct.

Discussion:

While I did not achieve the high percentage of female respondents I had hoped for, the gender demographic represented by the data in this survey closely mirrors the real world online gamer gender breakdown, so the overall results of the survey are of note. Interestingly enough, males and females spent nearly the same amounts of time gaming each week and played about the same number of games. This data conflicts with the commonly held stereotype that men are more avid gamers than women and that women are more likely to play fewer games (often justified by asserting that women do not have ways of learning about lots of games like men do in their social networks).

The total numbers of players who had played as the opposite gender shown in this survey mirrored the results of the Daedalus Project's survey on the same topic. Since the Daedalus Project had a significantly larger sample size than this, it can be reasonably inferred from the two data sets' similarities that the data in this survey is also accurate and meaningful.

That fewer males than females (59.09% versus 66.66%) felt that they had been treated differently playing as the opposite gender contests a common result. Often, results from the Daedalus Project indicate that players believe female characters are treated better than male characters. The trends observed by gender bending players are, however, consistent with observations from Daedalus Project survey takers – male players are observed being more generous to female players, more congenial, and more willing to assist females in combat (as observed by gender bending men). Male players are also less likely to come to the aid of another male and less likely to share resources with other males (as observed by gender bending females). That females observed males being more congenial and pleasant is an unusual result. Perhaps the female respondents were not accustomed to male-male camaraderie, or perhaps they were tired of being hit on, as many female respondents to the Daedalus Project's surveys report they frequently are.

Females in this survey were more than 10% more likely to report that they had observed other players treating each other differently because of gender. Perhaps this discrepancy is because female players are more likely to be the ones being treated differently by males or perhaps males prefer not to admit (or acknowledge) that they treat others differently. Alternatively, since females are still sometimes viewed as outsiders to the gaming community, perhaps females are simply more attuned to observing such differential treatment and more

aware of it. About the same number of males and females agreed that it is inappropriate to treat people differently based on gender as agreed that it is appropriate to do so, and about the same number of males and females were undecided on the topic.

The examination of words used to insult other players is one that has not frequently been conducted. The percentage of men using the gender-based insults was significantly higher than the percentage of females doing so. Additionally, while no women used the sexual-orientation-based insults, about 10% of men reported doing so.

It is interesting to note that both these sets of words (gender and sexual-orientation-based), when used by males towards males, on some level accuse the victim of possessing feminine qualities or being less masculine. When used by males towards women, the gender-based insults are particularly insulting, as they describe qualities that are considered undesirable or negative in women. It is also notable that men report using the word “cunt”, a word for the female genitalia that carries a highly negative connotation.

The male who supplied “pedophile”, “rape victim”, and “nigger” may have discovered one of the key qualities of a good insult: shock value. While he could not possibly know the criminal or psychological history of his target, nor his or her race, he has likely learned that these words frighten and aggravate people. By shocking other players and taking their minds off the game, he is giving himself the advantage. Like the players who admitted to using sophisticated insults to buy time to develop arguments, this young man uses crass, crude, socially unacceptable insults to shift others’ focus from the game and perhaps take advantage of their lapse in observation of the game or task at hand.

The Future of Online Equity & Conclusions

As an emerging medium, online games are unique from the rest of the mainstream media in a few key ways. There are some aspects of the current structure of online games that may keep them from falling prey to the same gender inequities as the rest of the media and preserve the integrity and inclusiveness of the community.

First, there is little argument against games offering a more inclusive array of body types and skin tones for players to assign to their characters. Games have taken steps to make sure they fully explain why character options are as they are, since many of the most popular online games require players to choose “races” that are non-human entities. As the characters have only slight resemblance to human forms, the unusually slim or muscular bodies of the races can be justified as non-idealized human forms but rather typical Night Elves or Undead Faeries – and for Night Elves and Undead Faeries, cellulite, obesity, and varying skin tones are not relevant issues. While it would be more inclusive to represent a broader range of body types in particular, games currently neatly avoid the issue and could continue to do so in the future in the same manner, and it would be considered acceptable for them to do so.

The current array of available bodies and appearances could be described as one that empowers and liberates, rather than demeans or insults, the participant. While in the real world, players are bound to their physical appearance in all of their interactions with others and the gender norms and expectations that come with their physical appearance, online they can be whoever they please.

As demonstrated by the gender bending survey, players may even try on the role of a player and/or character of the opposite gender – and many who do so feel that the other gender is friendlier when they cross over. Whether other players know their true gender is their decision – they may hide this information and there is little others could do to find out the truth. As a result, the online community is (whether it realizes it or not) very friendly to gender bending and alternative lifestyles such as cross-dressing and transsexuals.

The online hyper-masculine and hyper-feminine character figures allow players to shake off the constraints they find in their real world lives – whether they are as basic as a desire for a more muscular physique or as complicated as wishing to be the opposite gender. A man or woman who would prefer a different appearance or gender identity may create an idealized

version of him or herself online and experiment with what the world would be like if they looked and acted another way.

The phenomenon of online gamers creating characters that are idealized versions of themselves has not been overlooked in popular culture. *South Park*, a popular irreverent and topical cartoon show on the Comedy Central cable network received high acclaim for its episode about *World of Warcraft*. In the episode, the main characters (4 middle-school boys) begin playing *World of Warcraft* and quickly become addicted to their virtual lives and roles. The characters they choose are a coy parody of the real phenomena of online self-depiction. One young man chooses a hyper-masculine warrior character while another chooses an attractive woman (see image below). The episodes offer a poignant commentary on online life (in addition to the crude toilet humor *South Park* is famous for). The boys must face the most powerful player in *World of Warcraft* who, in the game is a muscular, large man. Everyone in the game is terrified of this powerful man and even the company that produces the game cannot stop him when he begins an evil rampage. In real life, the viewer learns, the most powerful player is actually a severely overweight man who has been playing the game so long, he no longer moves or communicates with other humans.



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⁸⁰ Image source: www.fuhnle.com

The real-world media has dynamics of dominance and submission in its presentation of both genders. The images in the media, particularly in advertising, are often intimidating. Advertisers use attractive archetypes of each gender to sell products with techniques of intimidation. It is human nature to desire to have the most desirable or attractive features. Women are advertised to with images of attractive women announcing “My [feature] is amazing. If you use this product, you can have this amazing [feature] too”. The implicit message is a competitive one – “I am better than you are”.

Men too are advertised to with images of attractive women. On *G4*, a cable network devoted to gamer culture, images of women are used to advertise products such as deodorant and quick fix workout products. In one particularly notable advertisement for a muscle-building product called “Big Guns”, which showcases scantily-clad young women clinging to a man’s large arm muscles, a slim young woman in a string bikini addresses the camera with a sultry, “Do you have big guns? If not... then get big guns... Right... *now*...”. The implication in this advertisement is that men with “big guns” are admired and even demanded by slender women in string bikinis. Additionally, *G4* features segments called “Geek Fantasies” during commercial breaks in late-night programs. In “Geek Fantasies”, slender young women dressed in Princess Leia (from *Star Wars*) themed bikinis and schoolgirl outfits to represent Hermione from *Harry Potter* address the viewers with misquoted lines from their respective works of fiction. Not only are the characters misrepresented in their dress, their characters’ images are being contorted into hyper-feminized, overtly sexual figures – which is particularly disturbing in the case of Hermione who is, in the *Harry Potter* series, below the legal age of consent in most states. Additionally, both women are powerful characters in their original contexts, but are made sexually subservient and submissive by the way their image is presented.

While the real world media exploits images of women to sell products and hook viewers with sexually-charged images, online games are an opportunity for women to take control of these images and use them in a way that empowers women, rather than intimidates. Women may adopt a feminine, slender, bikini-clad appearance and become powerful warriors or lord over the economy. Women in online games are at no disadvantage to men when it comes to becoming empowered – the online economy has no glass ceiling. Women in this way take control of the dynamic of dominance and submission and share it with men to create a culture or real gender equity, where both genders are equally capable and empowered. In addition, gender anonymity

adds to women's online empowerment, as female characters may not actually be female and males not actually male – and a mistrust of gender appearances develops that can deter people whose inclination is to treat each gender differently from continuing to do so. Someone who is inclined to flirt with females would not necessarily enjoy making advances on a male and, if the real world gender of a character that appears female is unknown, that person may restrain their attractive efforts.

Online games are not above the pressures and influences of the real world media. However, there is still hope for women and other marginalized groups to assert themselves as powerful and equal participants in the online community. Game producers will need to continue to include women in order to generate a profit. Women are increasingly interested in becoming involved in online games. The future seems bright for women in online games and, with the right forward steps, the industry could, at least in one community, help to lay the groundwork real-world gender equity.

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