

Multiple Pleasures Women and Online Gaming

T.L. Taylor

Abstract. This article explores the issue of gender and computer games by looking at the growing population of women in massive multiplayer online role-playing environments (MMORPGs). It explores what are traditionally seen as masculine spaces and seeks to understand the variety of reasons women might participate. Through ethnographic and interview data, the themes of social interaction, mastery and status, team participation, and exploration are considered as compelling activities female gamers are engaging in online. Given that these online games often include a component of fighting, the issue of violence is discussed. Rather than seeing this group of players as an anomaly, this article explores how focusing on the pleasures women derive from gaming might lend a more complex understanding of both gender and computer games. Finally, a consideration of how design is affecting this emerging genre is explored.

Introduction

A recent study by the market research firm PC Data Online placed women as surpassing men in the population of online gamers.¹ While the margin was quite slim (50.4 per cent), such research is beginning to give us a glimpse into an emerging community of internet users. While many of the women playing online games are involved with more traditional kinds like Hearts or Dominos, there are a growing number playing massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs). The market for this genre has grown dramatically. After years in the making and millions of dollars in development costs *EverQuest*, one of the most popular, purports a subscriber base of around 430,000 with peak play periods hosting around 100,000 simultaneous gamers.² While the numbers of women playing these games doesn't outnumber the numbers of men, officials at the three major MMORPGs (*Asheron's Call*, *Ultima Online*, and *EverQuest*) counted women players at between 20–30 per cent.³ Indeed, one executive at Sony Online Entertainment has suggested that 'the gateway for getting women into gaming is going to be through these role-playing games'.⁴

The growing phenomenon of MMORPGs presents a fascinating opportunity to look at the ways game space becomes interwoven with online community and role playing. Furthermore, these games offer a chance to revisit the question of women and gaming. While much of the literature so far has focused on the look of Laura Croft

or the need for more 'girl games', MMORPGs push us to think about the pleasures those 20-30 per cent of players are experiencing. Often the women and girls playing what are typically defined as masculine games are framed as simply exceptions. I want to suggest that taking this demographic as a *centra*/location of research is key to understanding the complexities around gender and computer games. Why it is women enjoy this kind of game, despite the fact that it has often not been explicitly designed with them in mind and in fact may at times actively disenfranchise them? I want to move beyond framing women and gaming as a 'pink games' issue – one which suggests we simply need games geared to traditionally feminine interests and sensibilities. This kind of approach is typified, for example, by the perspective that sees women enjoying the socialising or ethical quandaries of games and men the raw power they are able to exert in them.⁵ But is it so simple? I propose we need a more complex analysis that acknowledges the multiple pleasures of gaming – for both women and men.

It is important to keep in mind the multiple contexts in which gaming occurs. MMORPGs in particular are not a flat landscape, but one in which the specificities of engagement must be accounted for. The socialising model doesn't acknowledge the complicated ways women in these games operate in a variety of simultaneous, yet often quite different, social spheres. Approaches that frame women as only wanting to talk overlook the fact that players are social actors whose interactions and identities are context specific. People move through a variety of spaces, each having their own set of norms and goals. So, for example, MMORPGs put the user in many settings: within a guild, amongst intimates, amongst acquaintances, amongst strangers, with enemies and opposing guilds, with teams, within message boards, and within particular servers. Each of these settings bring with them an attendant group of specificities that must be accounted for when trying to understand not only how people game, but why they game in particular ways at particular times.

It is this variety of social spheres that lends to the multiple pleasures of gaming the title of this article refers to. While my intent is to specifically address women and gaming I suspect at least some of this analysis will hold true for men as well. However, I am making a point of focusing on women as a response to what appears to be gaps in the literature on the subject. A good portion of the work on gender and gaming has so far focused not simply on girl (as opposed to women) gamers, but console or single-player gamers in particular.⁶ In this study I specifically look at women gamers (ranging in age from 18-35) playing on a MMORPG. This work is a product of my two and a half year ethnography on a major MMORPG, *EverQuest (EQ)*, as well as interviews with female *EQ* players.⁷ Throughout the past several years I have spent

hundreds of hours playing the game alongside men and women, as well as participating in several guilds. Drawing on the network of bulletin boards run by players, I have been able to follow a range of discussions both about the game itself and how users are negotiating the intersections of play and 'offline' space. Finally, I have conducted formal and informal interviews with a number of women – including both longtime and new gamers. It is worth noting that this is not a comparative project and only in later stages of the research will I be able to determine how applicable my argument would be for men. Instead, in this article I want to strategically refocus on understanding not only why women game, but the pleasures they derive from doing so.

The world of *EverQuest*

Like many games in the MMORPG genre, *EverQuest* is made up of a fantastical land inhabited by numerous creatures and people. The world of *EQ* is rendered in high resolution three-dimensional graphics complete with accompanying soundtrack. By purchasing the game and paying a monthly fee users are able to connect to *EverQuest* through client programs that communicate with servers. Not unlike text-based MUDs, in which multiple players come together in real-time in a networked virtual world, *EverQuest* exists as a persistent environment players can connect to 24 hours a day. Also much like MUDs, *EQ* offers users an opportunity to construct an identity, inhabit a social space, and in general participate in the life of the world.

Upon first logging into the game users are prompted to create a character. There are several major decisions a player makes at this point. They must pick a name for themselves (or have the system randomly generate one) and choose whether they will be male or female. In the latest version of the software they are also able to customise their face. Given the nature of the game the other major decision a player must make is what 'race' and 'class' they will be.⁸ The race/class designations are drawn from well-established tabletop gaming conventions (like *Dungeons and Dragons*) and they significantly affect how gameplay will proceed for the user. 'Race' refers to a set of what might be termed species types. In the case of *EverQuest* most are drawn from old gaming structures with a few novelties being added. Users can choose to be a barbarian, dark elf, dwarf, erudite, gnome, half elf, halfling, high elf, human, iksar, ogre, troll, wood elf, and vah shir. Each race has its own starting point in the lands of *EQ* and comes with particular advantages and disadvantages. For example, gnomes are not able to carry very much weight but they are endowed with particularly good night vision. The decision users make about what class they will play is equally important due to the fact that it shapes in a very deep way the nature of their experience. Once again, *EverQuest* draws on long established gaming conventions by offering class selections of bard, beastlord, cleric, druid, enchanter, magician, monk, necromancer, paladin, ranger, rogue,

shadowknight, shaman, warrior, and wizard. It is also the case that not all classes can be played by all races so users often make choices based on weighing preferences for one or the other category. Since each class comes with particular skills and points of focus the decision to play one class versus another is a significant one. Warriors, for example, will spend their game life charging into battle and hitting creatures directly while wizards will stand back and cast spells. Clerics, by contrast, will spend most of their game time healing other players.

Once a player sets up their character they then enter the world of *EverQuest* and begin the process of gaining levels to progress through the game. There are currently 60 levels a player can attain and with each level comes new skills, powers, and abilities. Players raise their level, or gain experience, by killing monsters (also known as 'mobs') that represent a challenge to them. Experience can also be gained through quests, though this is generally not the primary way players level. By working either on their own or in a team with others, users wander the land constantly looking for creatures, or people, to hunt. While some servers allow for players to kill other players, the majority of *EQ* users spend time on non-Player vs. Player (PvP) servers and only kill non-player character (NPC) mobs that operate through a very low-level AI. As users progress up through levels and become more powerful they will be able to travel more freely throughout the fairly large world that makes up the game and they will find that creatures that once threatened them no longer prove menacing.

Despite this fairly straightforward model of play in which users simply kill monsters to progress, *EverQuest* actually provides women with a wide variety of ways to enjoy the game. Rather than being just a one-dimensional space of hunting to gain levels, the game in fact offers multiple ways for women to enjoy engaging with it.

Community and Socialisation

When reasons are given for why women in general use computers it is often framed around how they enjoy communicating with others and how new media provide opportunities for these kinds of activities. Similarly, this is the area we most frequently hear about when women and gaming are discussed. In the case of MMORPGs it is certainly one of the central features to the space. As one game designer who placed a very high value on sociality put it, 'what women are finding so interesting about these games is that they provide a sense of community and social structure you don't see in other games'.⁹ Chatting, connecting with other people, forming relationships and maintaining them are all aspects of the interpersonal pleasure MMORPGs afford and multiuser games have benefited by drawing in this component of online life.

It is important, however, to recognise the multilayered nature of social life in a such spaces. The most basic understanding of online socialisation frames the activity in terms of 'chat' – that you simply talk to people in the digital environment. Much as offline, however, there are variations to social life and community which are quite rich. In-game socialising can take the form of marriages between characters (either role played or not), the creation of guilds (formal collectives of players), role playing opportunities, having regular friends and hunting partners, and participating in the general spontaneous community interactions as they occur day by day. Out-game socialising can involve communicating and spending time with offline relations who are tied to the game in some way. In these instances we see people playing the game (and talking about it) with partners and family. Husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, parents and children often play together.¹⁰ Friends and co-workers are another significant group connecting to each other via the game and it is not unusual to uncover elaborate offline connections between players. Users also participate in a variety of out of game activities through bulletin boards, mailing lists, and conventions.

Beyond enjoyment of the activity itself there is also a significant role these 'people skills' provide to actual game play. Grouping with others, especially at the high-end game, can often be crucial in not only gaining experience but also in attaining valued *EQ* objects. Being known as a good player, as one who is even fun to have around, can act as a real commodity – as social capital. Players who are able to harness their social skills bring a value to their gameplay that is often unquantifiable but nonetheless quite valuable. Having social connections can act as currency in furthering a gamer's progress, especially at the higher levels. Being invited onto teams, asked to join a prestigious 'raid' or guild, and being the beneficiary of valuable in-game item hand-me-downs can all result from well-developed social networks. There is also a kind of people management that social skills bring and good raid organisers, for example, usually exhibit this. It is additionally often the case that membership in a guild offers players real opportunities that they might not have otherwise and being socially seen as a good potential guildmate is crucial to membership generally. As many *EQ* players remark, the high-end game is one in which group participation is key to success and social adeptness can help players become recognised and valued members of the community. In this regard, skills typically marked as feminine (social connection, group facilitation, and good communication) can be seen to fit well with the social organisation of the game. Rather than just seeing community participation as simply involving chatting, it speaks to a range of skills and women are certainly actively involved in this aspect of MMORPG life.

Identity play A second pleasure is one also seen in other non-gaming virtual worlds and much has been written on it in the context of environments like MUDs. MMORPGs give the user (in varying degrees) an opportunity to engage in various identity performances and corresponding forms of play. Both because of the explicit nature of the space (role play) and the engagement with avatars, users can construct identities which may or may not correlate to their offline persona.¹¹ Much as with work on MUDs, we find examples in *EQ* of people experimenting with creating selves. As Turkle has noted, 'When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass'.¹²

Users are not formally bound to only play characters that correspond to their offline gender or to create identities that simply mirror their 'real world' temperaments. Indeed there is a long tradition within role play gaming culture to try and inhabit characters that are quite opposite of how you might normally think and act. While there has been important work done on critically appraising exactly how much freedom people have in reconstructing themselves online, virtual environments without a doubt remain a space in which users are constantly creating and performing a variety of identities.¹³ Given *EverQuest* allows users to create up to eight distinct characters per server (with 45 servers in total) there is at least formally a potential to explore a range of personae. It is not uncommon to find longtime players with several active or semi-active characters per account, though generally confined to one server.¹⁴ One notable phenomenon is the way most women share information about their characters with friends and guildmates, thereby plugging into their pre-existing community structure. Rather than keeping identities distinct from one another, it is not uncommon for players to know who their friend's alternative characters are. There are exceptions to this of course (sometimes people only share such information with a select group) but overall the terrain of identity play in *EQ* is something more akin to parallel or linked character threads than strict persona boundaries.

The power of the avatar, however, does not have to come strictly through role playing, but simply in the ways it acts as the key artifact through which users not only know others and the world around them, but themselves. One woman, in describing the connection that developed said:

[I] spent so much time expressing myself as her and interacting with people as her. And that's one of those things of course, as you develop your relationships with people as your online avatar you understand that they generally relate to you as your online avatar and not as you the person. I mean they know you aren't really an elf and they probably, like, don't socially regard you as an elf or anything like that but nonetheless they refer to you

by your avatar's name, they base their experience and perception of you entirely on events that have occurred in the game involving your avatar [...]
 There are all these people I know who exist for me only in terms of my interactions with their avatar. I don't know really how old they are, what they do. It's all based on the avatar thing.

Through the early decisions players make about their race and class they begin to fashion for themselves unique identities in the gamespace. As they progress in the game they are able to further customise themselves by choosing a surname and obtaining different objects. In a world in which you might very well run into two barbarian warriors with the exact same face, distinguishing oneself through naming and outfitting becomes key. While there is a significant focus on choosing particular clothing and weapons for very utilitarian reasons (better statistics being predominant), many women I have spoken to discuss enjoying playing with how their avatar looks and how they have been able to customise their character in particular ways.

Though people do seem to keep a firmer boundary between offline and online selves than we have seen in strictly social virtual worlds,¹⁵ avatars continue to present themselves as evocative vehicles for identity and MMORPGs offer some unique possibilities. Given the kind of identification with characters some researchers have noted, this link can be particularly powerful.¹⁶ As one player said to me: 'There's a little bit of yourself in your character, for my characters anyway. With my druid [I'm a] raw nature, nature-loving, tree-hugging girl. [And] I love animals, I love nature, so part of me is in her.' While gender swapping is also certainly something that occurs in *EQ*, one of the more interesting aspects to consider is the way the game may allow access to gender identities that are often socially prohibited or delegitimised offline – simultaneously sexy and powerful or masculine and beautiful identities. Women in *EverQuest* are constantly engaged in playing with traditional notions of femininity and reformulate gender identities through aspects of the space that are directly tied to its nature as a game.

Mastery and Status

This linking of power and sexuality that we find in women's *EQ* identities is closely tied to a general pleasure derived from advancement in the game. Kinder has pointed out how many video games rely on placing women as the 'object of the male quest – various sleeping beauties who wait to be rescued by male winners'¹⁷ and while some of that may play into *EQ*'s backstory, the ways the game allows women to occupy active roles is quite notable. One woman I interviewed expressed an intense focus on the challenges of the game:

I enjoy progressing in the game, having a sense that there is this path that I'm going on and I've made some progress toward it. I used to enjoy

xp'ing [gaining experience] and leveling a lot, in and of itself as a kind of progression. I have enjoyed in the past kind of competitive xp'ing, like on my previous server I was the first enchanter to get to level 5 on the server. And that was a competitive thing, I definitely put in a lot of effort [...] I'm very goal oriented I think so I like setting goals and going for it.

This kind of competitive game orientation (either against yourself via set goals or others) is often overlooked as a powerful motivation for women. Even for players who aren't so intently focused on achieving specific levelling goals within very clear time periods, the excitement over reaching a new level or getting out of a particularly bad one (a 'hell level') is not lost on any player, including the women.

Within the gaming space itself mastery and status can be performed and signalled in a variety of ways. Users are able to see the level of others (as long as the person isn't in role play or anonymous mode) and can also see guild membership which, in the case of 'uberguilds' carries special meaning. Sometimes particular skill sets are required for crafting special armour or jewelry and competency can be demonstrated through mastering the ability to create highly valued game objects. As one woman told me, 'I wanted to be the first platinum jeweler on the server'.

It is also worth exploring how what is often simply noted under the category 'identity production' may in fact be tied up with more complicated issues of game competency and receiving social status. Sherman has noted the development of 'social "power"' through time spent perfecting gaming skills.¹⁸ Obtaining epic weapons or more generally owning impressive equipment (weapons, armour, robes, rare items – especially when won in a fight and not bought) all become artifacts of mastery and signal to both the user and the server community their skill at the game. In these cases while objects do play a role in creating the identity of the user, it is not simply a neutral performance but one tied up with signifying power and status – categories not often attributed to women. The practice of inspecting other players gear by clicking on their avatar is one way the system formalises the recognition of equipment. While this is often a way of 'checking other users out', sometimes it happens inadvertently when people mistakenly target an avatar. People will often apologise if they mistakenly inspect another user and one woman I spoke to described how she replies saying, 'I'm like "not a problem". I'm proud of myself. I have no problem with people inspecting me because you know, I've worked hard for what I have.'

In addition to the in-game performance of status and power, female players actively transfer their accomplishments to out-game venues. For example, below are signature pictures (images

attached to a bulletin board posting) of several women gamers. The first image (Figure 1) is a representation of a character in a vulnerable, even sexual, in pose. The kittens seem to have gotten the best of her and give the picture a playful quality. What places this image in the category of mastery and status, however, is the sword. Players of the game will recognise this as an epic weapon, an object that requires not only a high level to achieve, but typically involves several long quests and the coordination of much game talent and support.

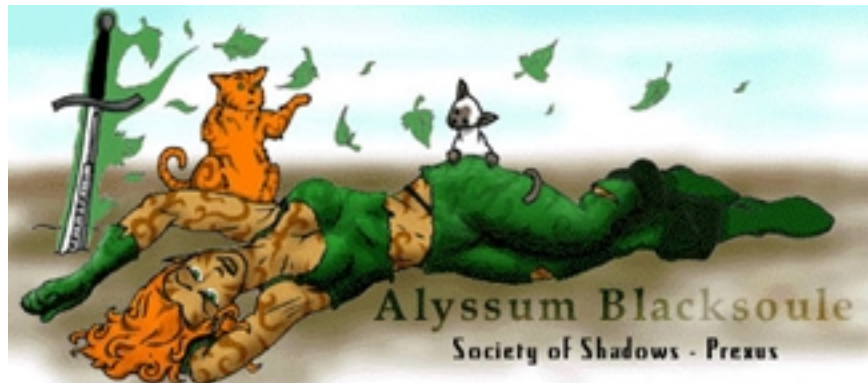


Figure 1. Druid epic fanart.

In the second image (Figure 2), several elements are combined which also signal a kind of in-game power. The image itself is a pastiche, with components drawn from both game and other artwork. The character is positioned in a fairly aggressive stance and stands over the slain body of a dragon. For the most part dragons in this world are one of the hardest creatures to kill. They are generally not defeated by only one person, yet this image represents a lone victor, alluding more to the abstract power they possess than any single instance of combat. The digitally altered backscene of a nearby lightening storm plays on a familiar trope of power and dominance. To push home the point, the author has inserted the tagline 'Never underestimate the power of a bard', referring to their character's class. There is, however, something quite amusing about the whole scene being framed at the top by the name 'Mysticpurr', especially given the somewhat ambiguous gender of the avatar. The juxtaposition of the seemingly playful, even feminine, name against the representation of power is very common and appears to be one of the ways women in the game self-mediate the intersection of traditional gendered identity and these more provocative representations of accomplishment and status.

In a third image we see a slightly different way mastery is publicly represented and this is through the disclosure of a user's multiple characters. In the following a single player has made a visual motif of her personae in the game. While some of the elements of the



Figure 2. Bard and dragon fanart.

image are not from the game (the skull, for example), all the avatars are. This user provides us a glimpse of her three characters (Tauntra, Cintara, and Xari), with Tauntra shown in two poses. Several of the items in the picture (the shield and bowl, for example) indicate a certain accomplishment due to their being difficult to acquire and taken together we are given a sense that this woman has some real experience in the game. The use of dragon imagery typically signals an engagement with power – both as a symbol of it and in the fact that they can only be defeated by high level users.



Figure 3. Persona montage fanart.

This multiplicity is also represented in older-style text signatures (.sig), personal notations at the end of a posted message, that get used on bulletin boards or discussion lists. A fairly common form is

for people to list their characters and levels, as well as any server, guild, and role playing information. While the .sig serves to keep the community informed about 'who is who' and acts as a way of customising a posting, it also provides some clear markers of mastery and status. This information can additionally lend to the legitimacy of board comments since experience is seen as a valuable asset in the game. Knowledge can be authorised through these kinds of public signals of status. In the following four signature files a range of information is woven together. The first one, for example, notifies the reader that the poster has several characters (Asherea and Naharet) of particular levels (47th and 31st) and classes (druid and cleric) in the guild Shadowclaw on the server Prexus. Each of these elements communicates to the reader the author's game status, level of mastery, and authority to speak.

Asherea Lonewolf 47 Druidess – Prexus
Naharet Darkhealer 31 Cleric – Prexus
Shadowclaw

Kamalian Komra 52 Vicar – Povar
Aerorafan 22 Bard – Povar

Naeron Thunderforge – 58 dwarven cleric – Prexus
Durrael de Lazaroth – 53 erudite magician – Prexus
Erzikhan Lonewolf – 44 barbarian warrior – Prexus

Arris Trueheart
54th Cavalier of Mithanniell Marr
Of the Lanys T'Vyl Server
Circle of Truth ... Forever

Such signatures thus act in several quite functional ways. They become a method for users to draw continuity between virtual spaces (game and 'off-site' communication forums) and lend legitimacy, authenticity, and authority to their words. Ultimately they serve as examples of the ways women may communicate their game status and mastery to others.

Exploration

Beyond the more explicit pleasures tied to levelling in the game (which is very narrowly linked to killing monsters), most women I have spoken with express a real enjoyment of engaging with the game as a world and environment. Given the geographic organisation of a space like EverQuest, users are able to move through an entire world, often a quite expansive one, and explore different lands and inhabitants. Although Schott and Horrell found that the girl gamers in their study avoided competitive play, they

did find a similar engagement with exploration suggesting that 'respondents were focused around the freedom that RPG's gave to exploration of its virtual environment for the accumulation of symbols that possess general life enhancing qualities'.¹⁹ One woman I spoke with recounted her experiences trekking her necromancer around the world ('from one end of Norrath to the other') and the peril and excitement such a journey brought. Another told me she specifically created a druid because they 'were the ultimate explorers and at that stage of the game I just really wanted to explore' and then of the fun of finding herself as a newbie lost in the Greater Faydark zone and eventually 'running from orcs'. Fuller and Jenkins have noted the kind of special 'landscape' games provide and MMORPGs present some of the clearest examples of movement through elaborate virtual spaces (though with a much richer sense of character and embodiment than early videogames offered).²⁰

While men and women alike can enjoy traversing these spaces, women are afforded an experience they are unlikely to have had offline. While both the landscape and its creatures might threaten the explorer, in the game space this threat is not based upon gender. Unlike the 'real world' in which gender often plays a significant role in not only the perception of one's safety, but its actuality, in *EverQuest* women may travel knowing they are no more threatened by the creatures of the world than their male counterparts are. While this may seem an odd reassurance, it is actually far from minor. Risk of travel in-game is tied to more general categories of faction (does a particular town or zone inhabitants hate your class or race), power (do the area's creatures know you are more powerful than they or are they confident in their ability to kill you first), or skill (can you effectively hide, sneak, or pass through undetected). Because of this gender-neutral approach to threat and safety, there is a kind of freedom of movement afforded that women often don't generally have access to otherwise. It is also the case that as one levels and obtains greater mastery of the game space, zones of free exploration are broadened. This, combined with the nature of threat in exploration, means that an area that was previously quite dangerous to you was (a) not dangerous because of your gender and (b) might eventually become accessible with game competency. This is an important pleasure of the game and many women enjoy extended travel and exploration of the virtual world.

Team sport and combat

The final pleasure is that of participating in team activities and combat in general. Being in a group (a team) brings with it a range of traditional issues associated with sport. Groups have leaders (either informal or formal) and participants engage in various roles and tasks for successful play. Within the context of a group there will also be instances of praise and critique, as well as the ongoing negotiations that take place with informal 'pickup' groups. Women's sports have only recently come to be valued in any serious way in the USA (Title IX²¹ marked a crucial turning point in changing structural values around women's play) and access to

group sport in any lifelong way has been something most women haven't enjoyed. In addition, team sports have thus far been gender divided, with men and women occupying different teams and leagues. Grouping in worlds such as *EverQuest* provide an interesting opportunity for women to not only participate in group play, but work closely with men. Grouping involves proving worth and skill, as well as the benefits afforded well regarded and valued players. The enjoyment of this kind of new team sport is something women have direct access to in *EQ*.

Interestingly, it was often around grouping issues that I heard women articulate why they preferred active, powerful characters. While within the *EverQuest* community there are heated debates about the value different classes bring to a combat situation, generally most people articulate group-usefulness as a key component in valuing a character. I have been struck by the ways women speak about wanting to have powerful or valuable characters for team situations. For example, one woman said about a character she played: 'In that [group] environment an enchanter is just very powerful. In a group situation they could make or break the group. They required skill, a lot of skill. I found them challenging and interesting and the ability to control the flow of combat was, I thought, really really interesting.' This focus on active engagement with the needs of a group and the concrete value a skilled player can bring repeatedly came up in my observations and interviews with women.

The kinds of activities players engage in (both in groups and solo) to actually fight monsters gets to the heart of the pleasure of combat. The traditional girl games line of reasoning has not left us with a complicated understanding of the ways women might approach the issue of violence in a game. Cunningham, for example, recounts how girls she interviewed explicitly avoided genres like *Barbie Fashion Designer*, saying 'I'd rather play violent games any day'.²² She further suggests that: 'In most areas of society this violent and aggressive side of a girl/woman's nature has to be repressed in conformity to socially expected norms of what is acceptable "feminine" behavior. Playing violent games gives female players the chance to express this aggression in a safe context.'²³

In general the intersections of mastery and power previously discussed are quite complex for female gamers and they cannot be unlinked from the violence of these games. I have been struck by how often women remark on enjoying jumping into the fray of fights, taking on difficult monsters, and, as one user put it, 'kicking ass and taking names'. This is not unlike some of the reports about 'grrl gamers' and women involved in playing 'first person shooters'.²⁴ Understanding women's relationship with game violence is more complicated than might be commonly thought. Women gamers I have interviewed have talked about the

pleasure of hunting and jumping into fights, saying things like 'Yeah, I enjoy going out and beating down evil mobs' or 'If I'm in a bad mood, ya know, I'm in a bad mood so it's time to go kill something, take my aggressions out'. Often they playfully contest gender stereotypes around women and fighting, like the one user who laughingly recounted how she would role play her halfling cleric (a very short character of a 'support' class) saying, 'She's so tough. I'll run into the mob before the tanks do [shouting] "Ah, get in my belly!"' She went on to say:

I think what turns me onto the gaming is the feeling of empowerment. In real life I'd never be able to go up to a giant and beat it down or whatever. But when you're in the game, you can become whatever you want. If you want to be this really, really tough character one day or you can just be whatever [...] In the game if you don't like something you can kill it. I don't know, I just feel more 'rawr!' I am druid, hear me roar.²⁵

While combat in the game is on the one hand quite extreme (you kill monsters and potentially other users) and on the other also muted (there is graphically no blood or gore), my sense is that the enjoyment of violence takes place at an abstract level. It is closely tied to the skills involved to take down a mob, the precise timings and movements required, the skill of playing your class well in a battle situation, the adrenaline rush involved with a fight and the general ability to even engage in this type of activity. The violence is simply a product of the more elaborate and valuable activity of competently playing a character. In this way the actual fight is as much an opportunity to demonstrate the valued qualities of game mastery as anything.

Design limits While there is much to praise in what MMORPGs afford women and the kinds of multiple pleasures we can find there, it is important to consider the ways they represent partial systems and ones in which we see continued limits on how gender is being figured into game space. One consideration is the way designers may have bold, even progressive, visions of what their virtual world might be and the subsequent gaps between those imaginations and their implementation.²⁶ Brad McQuaid, original producer/co-designer of *EQ* and now president/CEO of Sigil Games, recounted his approach to this issue writing: 'I guess my philosophy when it comes to gender is somewhat akin to how I feel about race – I prefer the "color blind" approach. Just as when I encounter someone who is of a different color I don't really ascribe much relevance, so also did we approach *EverQuest*.'²⁷ While this kind of approach is well-intentioned there are unfortunately many mechanisms – be they marketing strategies, community practices, or pre-existing socio-cultural frameworks and value

systems – along the way that intervene. The idea that colour-blindness (or in this case gender-blindness) can simply be achieved through discounting the power (or value) of these categories is risky. Indeed, the ability to even suggest such a position can often only be taken by those who aren't subjected to its force and weight. The rhetorical effect is that issues pertaining to gender and race get taken off the table as areas to be articulated, debated, and confronted.²⁸ While the impulse behind adopting a colour-blind approach is admirable, and may in fact work well for some aspects of design, in the absence of explicit critical thinking and practice it can end up feeding back into stereotypes.

We can see this played out in several aspects of gender and *EverQuest*. Beyond the ways images of women get deployed to sell the game – as in the advert in Figure 4 with the tagline 'He's opened up a whole new world for me!' – one of the central methods by which we see these limits reassert themselves is via avatars and digital bodies.



Figure 4. *EverQuest* ad in *Best of MAXIM*, 2001.

Avatars are central to both immersion and the construction of community in virtual spaces. They are mediators between personal identity and social life. As a respondent in one of my previous studies put it, they are the 'material to work with' when you are in a virtual world.²⁹ Debates over the ways women are represented in games, as in discussions of Laura Croft and other prominent game heroines, touch on this and when dealing with multiuser spaces the question of representation becomes central to the experience of the user.³⁰ As one woman I interviewed noted: 'The avatars do kinda affect the way I think about my characters sometimes [...] When I play a wood elf with the happy expression on her face I kinda try to be more cheery. I do notice a difference of how others treat my characters.' As with offline life, bodies come to serve as mediation points between the individual and the

world (both social and material). What they are and more importantly, what social meanings they are given, then matters.

Unfortunately, what I have continually found is that women in *EQ* often struggle with the conflicting meanings around their avatars, feeling they have to 'bracket' or ignore how they look. In the following image (Figure 5), I present examples of several avatars in their most basic form.³¹ In the first four images (the 'barbarian,' 'dark elf,' 'erudite,' and 'wood elf') the characters are clothed with very little or sheer fabrics and their shapes seem to follow the stereotype we find in many computer games. The final image in the series (the 'human') shows a female character provided with what many see as a more realistic or reasonable default outfit (although still with very pronounced cleavage).



Figure 5. Sample avatars (Sony, 2002)

While there is a fair amount of diversity amongst female players about what avatars are preferable, there seems to be a consistent message that they want a choice in how they look online. It is indeed possible for women to hold complicated relationships to even stereotypically gendered characters. Lisa Edmonds has noted, for example, that 'After seeing so many games in which women are little more than background props, or in which the protagonist's only objective is to blow up everything in sight before he is blown up, Lara Croft is a joy to become during a brief escape from reality' – one of the central issues repeated is that of

choice.³² As one user wrote in her review of gender representation in *EverQuest*:

So what do women want from role playing games? I cannot speak for all women but I can for myself, that the answer lies in simple choice. I certainly want the ability to play a woman, and I want to be able to decide what she looks like as much as possible. I want my characters to be beautiful, but not necessarily brazen. I certainly don't want to be forced to display even virtual buttocks to the world to the howls of laughter from my fellow players.³³

While the discussion around these comments generated some fascinating dialogue, not the least of which highlighted the diverse ways female players think about 'sexiness', the theme of choice recurred.³⁴ As another member went on to write:

I would like the choice of character coverings, and I would like the chars to not look like they all have some bizarre scoliosis. I don't have a problem with a 'sexy' character; I just don't want to play one where body parts are hanging out to the world (half elves, dark elves). This did influence my choice of race, because the dwarven women are allowed to stand straight and keep themselves clothed in something that makes sense. Guess I have a gripe with representations of fantasy women; who would go into battle wearing a chain bikini? Really? OUCH! Anyway, it is annoying, but I keep reminding myself that Verant probably did not consider women a viable market share of the game when they designed it.³⁵

What is striking about this post is not only the way the player frames her critique, but how she tries to imagine her place in the designer's mind and whether or not she has a legitimate seat at the gaming table.³⁶ When the subject comes up on bulletin boards (a not infrequent topic) it is also often noted that the original avatars were designed by a woman, thus suggesting the entire subject is more complex than might first appear. According to Brad McQuaid:

Rosie Cosgrove, our Art Director, felt strongly that the male and female playable characters should be 'exaggerated' or, more precisely, 'glamorized'... sort of like 'Barbie and Ken', I suppose. The result was the somewhat controversial appearance of many of the female characters, they being rather voluptuous and often scantily clad (although, really, not worse than what you can see at the beach). We received all sorts of feedback, ranging from praise to outright outrage at the 'sexism' allegedly employed. And while I don't want to speak for Rosie directly, I do recall her reacting as follows: 1. many of the female characters were how she'd personally want to appear in a 'fantasy' game and 2. because our core demographic (not by design, but rather simply by fact) were approximately 18-30 year old males, their appearances made sense. In retrospect, I think heroic, exaggerated player

characters can be depicted with less controversy and probably a bit more conservatively ... but that's just my opinion.

The writer of the post was indeed not entirely off the mark in her analysis of the role of women in the game. They are seen as valuable additions to the playerbase but not entirely figured in as the 'core'. In fact, colour-blind approaches actually make it quite difficult to talk about the ways representations may in fact be contributing to the very nature of the demographic. Because we are always working around, through, and with notions of race and gender it is only by acknowledging them that we can achieve true reflective practice. I appreciate McQuaid's sentiment that, upon reflection, there is probably a more sophisticated method to handle gender and avatars. I would, however, argue that it's only by moving to a framework that openly acknowledges the thorny terrain and critically considers these issues through the design process that the kind of progress he suggests might be possible. As Patricia Williams puts it: 'Creating community, in other words, involves this most difficult work of negotiating real divisions, of considering boundaries before we go crashing through, and of pondering our differences before we can ever agree on the terms of our sameness.'³⁷

Ultimately what is particularly distressing about the bracketing many women do while playing these games is the way that approach feeds into the impoverished view of online embodiment most designers seem to be operating with. Poor models, architectures, and underlying structures which rely on easy stereotypes overlook the power of these spaces as *embodied*, with all the possibilities that entails. A serious recognition of a sociology of the body might prove to drive more interesting design. Bodies are not simply neutral objects that have no bearing on our experience but act as central artifacts through which our identities and social connections are shaped. Bodies carry particular social meanings and are often profound sites of contestation.³⁸ As Synnott has put it: 'The body is not a "given", but a social category with different meanings imposed and developed by every age, and by different sectors of the population. As such it is therefore sponge-like in its ability to absorb meanings, but also highly political.'³⁹ Some are ascribed legitimacy and some are not. They become not only places in which we express our identities but, because they are socially constructed, offer or deny particular formulations. Bodies act not only as the conduit through which we participate in society but a mechanism through which communities themselves are performed. They not only facilitate the production of identities (shaping persona through the look and actions of an avatar) but social relationships and communication. They are not neutral and indeed their power lies in the very fact that they cannot be. People move their avatars through virtual spaces, using them to interact with each other and the world. Just as corporeal bodies are integral to our personal and social lives, avatars are central to our experience in digital environments.

The virtual world user who told me they see their avatar as 'material to work with' hits on the complicated ways bodies (and their corresponding digital incarnations as avatars) act as both social and personal artifacts. While there has been a dominant rhetoric of the fluidity of identity performance and meaning online, Polsky wisely notes that avatars themselves are never unencumbered, suggesting that 'even in virtual reality they are subject to organizational practices which, because they are a product of the social, never fully escape the social'.⁴⁰ Avatars do not appear in the game world as blank objects that allow users to construct independent meaning systems on them. They present themselves as complex symbolic referents which then circulate in a broader social economy.⁴¹ As each user encounters an avatar (their own or others) they make sense of it through a variety of social and personal 'stories'. Those stories help form the structure through which avatars act as agents for users. This experience can be either expansive or constraining and can foster either further immersion, identification, and affiliation or limit it. The kind of bracketing women appear to be forced to do when playing these games is thus unfortunate, from both a critical and design perspective.

This inattention to not only the power of embodied virtual spaces, but the meaning of the body more generally is something many designers continue to overlook.⁴² Kathryn Wright of *WomenGamers.com* reports on a fascinating roundtable she conducted at a Game Developers Conference several years ago.⁴³ She discusses the dismay of some of the male designers and how they felt that the subject of representation wasn't an issue of poor female body design but that *all* avatars are exaggerated. This is akin to viewing the design of *EQ* avatars as simply 'glamourized'. Certainly many of the male figures we see cropping up in games suffer from a hyperarticulated stereotype of masculinity with their overly developed chests and biceps. However, she rightly notes that such replies:

seem to miss the significance of the fact that female characters are not simply portrayed in a physically unrealistic manner, but are overly sexualized as well. As Sheri Graner Ray of Sirenia Software pointed out, male characters' sexual organs are not exaggerated in the same way as female characters' sexual characteristics are exaggerated – we do not see male game characters with huge penises, for example.⁴⁴

Although an argument might be made for the ways chests and biceps on male characters act as symbolic sexual characteristics, they are simultaneously able to represent power. This can be contrasted with the way large breasts *only* act as sexual markers and their meaning remains fairly one dimensional. One woman described the frustration this can produce: 'You're sitting there minding your own business and somebody says "Hey, nice

boobs". That's not what my character is. There's more to my character than her chest – much more than her rack.'

Interestingly, several women I interviewed expressed concern for the way a younger generation of girl gamers would have to make sense of these kinds of representations and behaviours. While *EQ* tries to provide some hurdles to minors playing the game, it is not unusual to find teenage boys and girls in the space. As one woman reflected on the issue:

I just try and ignore it but I guess the one thing that bothers me is the young girls that play. Like one of the little druids in our guild, she's 11 in RL [real life]. Her mom sits with her while she plays. I see how guys react toward my character and some of the rude things they've said to me I would not want them to say to an 11 year old child.

It is unfortunate if some of the positive experiences women can find in games like *EQ* continue to be countered by familiar old offline practices and 'lessons'.

Conclusion

As the genre of MMORPG emerges we are beginning to see the ways the traditional approach of 'pink games' presents its own set of challenges. As Funk points out, games that simply focus on friendship and sociality may overlook the fact that 'girls are looking for games which also push them to take risks and where there is a chance to be absolutely and unequivocally dominant' and further suggest that there 'may be unintended consequences to gender-specific software: girls may be less likely to benefit from developments in the gaming mainstream if they believe that only "girl games" are appropriate for them'.⁴⁵ Interestingly, McQuaid proposes one of the strengths of a game like *EverQuest* was that it precisely built on these broader design goals: 'It's also worth noting that, due to what makes MUDs and MMOGs compelling (character development, immersive worlds, strong community building tools and functionality), we always knew [it] could be fairly gender-neutral'.⁴⁶

While games like *EverQuest* are certainly popularising virtual reality in ways we have not seen before, it is clear that designers need to rethink not only who their users are but what is at stake in the artifacts they provide for them. Laurel suggests that the game industry has been 'horribly stunted' because it's 'been unwilling to look beyond itself to its audience'.⁴⁷ When you revisit the numbers of women playing the major MMORPGs, the figures are actually quite remarkable given they are not the demographic being targeted. In many ways, women play *despite* the game. Women gamers are finding fascinating and complicated pleasures in online games and while most of what we have seen in the literature so far

points to the social aspects that draw women in, it is clear that this does not tell the full story. Games like *EverQuest* appear to be offering venues for the interesting exploration of activities typically bounded off from each other – sociability and power, mastery and cooperation – and women are finding dynamic ways to inhabit these mass virtual worlds. They begin to help us imagine a type of space Jenkins proposes is necessary to avoid simplistic distinctions between girl and boy games:

We need to open up more space for girls to join – or play alongside – the traditional boy culture down by the river, in the old vacant lot, within the bamboo forest. Girls need to learn how to explore 'unsafe' and 'unfriendly' spaces, and to experience the 'complete freedom of movement' promised by the boys' games, if not all the time, then at least some of the time, to help them develop the self-confidence and competitiveness demanded of professional women. They also need to learn how, in the words of a contemporary bestseller, to 'run with the wolves' and not just follow the butterflies. Girls need to be able to play games where Barbie gets to kick some butt.⁴⁸

Cassell proposes an ambitious and valuable challenge for game design, outlining a method to 'build girls' games in such a way that the game itself participates in the construction of a child's gender and other aspects of the self, without a preconceived notion of what a girl is'.⁴⁹ While she is focusing on games for girls, her more general framework of feminist design principles intersects nicely with the ways participatory design processes might extend the range of virtual worlds. If designers would begin to rise to the challenge a sociology of the body presents and a more complicated understanding (and rendering) of gender, the possibilities for evocative and immersive environments might begin to truly draw in a diverse gaming population.

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Notes

¹ Lisa Guernsey, 'Women Play Games Online in Larger Numbers Than Men,' *The New York Times*, 4 January 2001.

² Bob Tedeschi, 'Expansion Sought for Online Games,' *The New York Times*, 31 December 2001; Jim Morrison, 'Homeward Bound,' *Context Magazine* (June 2001) at <http://www.contextmag.com/setFrameRedirect.asp?src=/archives/200106/Feature4HomewardBound.asp> (6 April 2002); Sony press release, 29 July 2002 at http://eqlive.station.sony.com/news_section/newsview.jsp?story=50196 (29 September 2002).

³ Emily Laber, 'Men are from Quake, Women are from Ultima,' *The New York Times*, 11 January 2001. One interesting comparison is with the numbers of women in the non-online gaming and console market. A recent article by Kathryn Wright cites a 1998 survey putting women at 43 per cent of computer gamers and 35 per cent of console ones. See 'Video Gaming: Myths and Facts,' *Womengamers.com* (2001) at <http://www.womengamers.com/articles/myths.html> (6 April 2002) for more details.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ Cornelia Brunner, Dorothy Bennett, Margaret Honey, 'Girl Games and Technological Desire' in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia M. Greenfield, 'Computer Games for Girls: What Makes Them Play?' in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998); Jennifer Glos and Shari Goldin, 'An Interview with Heather Kelly' in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998)

⁶ Gareth R. Schott and Kirsty R. Horrell, 'Girl Gamers and Their Relationship with the Gaming Culture', *Convergence*, 6, no. 4 (2000), pp. 36-53; Laura Groppe, 'Teen Girl Gaming: The New Paradigm', *Playing by the Rules: The Cultural Policy Challenges of Video Games Conference* (University of Chicago, October 2001), see <http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/conf2001/papers/groppe.html> (6 April 2002); Karen Orr Vered, 'Blue Group Boys Play Incredible Machine, Girls Play Hopscotch: Social Discourse and Gendered Play at the Computer' in *Digital Diversions: Youth Culture in the Age of Multimedia*, ed. Julian Sefton-Green (London: UCL Press, 1998); Yasmin B. Kafai, 'Video Game Designs by Girls and Boys: Variability and Consistency of Gender Differences' in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia M. Greenfield, 'Computer Games for Girls: What Makes Them Play?' in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

⁷ The ethnography portion of the research (including website visits and informal discussions) began in November 1999 and formal interviews commenced in June 2001. I continue to be actively involved in the game and have written on other aspects of it.

⁸ While these terms may seem odd to those familiar with their sociological meanings, I want to preserve using them as they are within this specific game and the broader gaming community.

⁹ Laber, p. 1.

¹⁰ See Nick Yee's 'The Norrathian Scrolls: A Study of EverQuest' (Version 2.5, 2001) at <http://www.nickyee.com/eqt/report.html> (6 April 2002) for some fascinating statistics on the *EverQuest* player population. A recent article by James Gorman also recounts the development of families and friends gaming online together ('The Family That Slays Demons Together,' *The New York Times*, 15 November 2001).

¹¹ Although the game is intended to draw in role playing elements it is important to note that the actual degree varies quite a bit amongst the different *EQ* servers. Many players note the decrease in role play since the game's introduction and in many cases consistent RP is confined to special servers.

¹² Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 178.

¹³ For some important critiques on the notion of fluid identities and the nearly utopic possibilities often purported to exist, see Lori Kendall, 'MUDder? I Hardly Know 'Er! Adventures of a Feminist MUDder,' in *Wired Women: Gender and New Realities in Cyberspace*, eds. L. Cherny and E.R. Weise (Seal Press, Toronto, 1996); Beth Kolko, 'Erasing @race: Going White in the (Inter)Face,' in *Race in Cyberspace*, eds. B. Kolko, L. Nakamura, and G.B. Rodman (Routledge, New York, 2000); Lisa Nakamura, 'Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet,' *Works and Days* 13 (1 and 2, 1995), pp. 181-193.

¹⁴ When users do branch out onto other servers it is often to play on special ones, such as those that support strict role play or player versus player activity. Game guides (volunteer help) also only act in their formal helper capacity on a server other than their regular one.

¹⁵ T.L. Taylor, 'Living Digitally: Embodiment in Virtual Worlds' in *The Social Life of Avatars: Human Interaction in Virtual Worlds*, ed. R. Schroeder (London: Springer-Verlag, 2002); Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995). The issue of how virtual world experiences 'filter back' is particularly striking though when women report that playing the game helped them become more confident or assertive. One female player recounted encouraging the younger women she encountered in the game to use conflicts as an opportunity to practice more assertive behaviour. Speaking about a guildmate in particular she said, 'So I've been telling her, build a little backbone, don't be afraid to tell people what you think. It might hurt their feelings, it might make you an enemy, but what can they do?'

¹⁶ Sean Gilmore and Alicia Crissman, 'Video Games: Analyzing Gender Identity and Violence in this New Virtual Reality,' *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 21 (1997), pp. 181-199.

¹⁷ Marsha Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p.106.

¹⁸ Sharon R. Sherman, 'Perils of the Princess: Gender and Genre in Video Games,' *Western Folklore*, 56 (Summer/Fall 1997), p. 251.

¹⁹ Schott and Horrell, p. 43.

²⁰ Mary Fuller and Henry Jenkins, 'Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue' in *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steven G. Jones (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1995).

²¹ US Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 'prohibits sex discrimination in federally assisted education programs' (*Title IX: Twenty Five Years of Progress*, US Department of Education, June 1997 at <http://www.ed.gov/pubs/TitleIX/> (2 October 2002). One of the outcomes of this legislation was that it required equal funding to girls athletics programmes.

²² Helen Cunningham, 'Mortal Kombat and Computer Game Girls' in *Electronic Media and Technoculture*, ed. John Thornton Caldwell (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 2000), p. 222.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

²⁴ See 'Voices from the Combat Zone: Game Grrlz Talk Back,' compiled by Henry Jenkins in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998) for some fascinating quotes by women actively participating in 'boy game culture'.

²⁵ This user refers here to two different characters she plays, a cleric and a druid.

²⁶ For more on this subject see T.L. Taylor, 'Intentional Bodies: Virtual Environments and the Designers Who Shape Them,' *International Journal of Engineering Education*, forthcoming.

²⁷ From personal correspondence with the author, 1 October 2002.

²⁸ Patricia Williams writes about the 'scripted denial [which] ultimately allowed visual images to remain in the realm of the unspoken, the unsaid filled by stereotypes and self-identifying illusion, the hierarchies of race and gender circulating unchallenged'. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1997), p.18.

²⁹ Taylor, 2002.

³⁰ Lisa Edmonds, 'A Joy Stick of One's Own,' *Herizons*, 12, no. 2 (Summer 1998), pp. 20-23; Jeanne B. Funk, 'Girls Just Want to Have Fun,' *Playing by the Rules: The Cultural Policy Challenges of Video Games Conference* (University of Chicago, October 2001) at

<http://culturalpolicy.uchicago.edu/conf2001/papers/funk2.html> (6 April 2002); Jon Goodwin, 'Follow the Bouncing Breasts,' *Joystick101.org* (31 January 2001) at

<http://www.joystick101.org/?op=displaystory;sid=2001/1/24/22336/2765> (6 April 2002); Lila Theodoros, 'Lara Croft vs. Quake Grrls: Misogyny, Female Representation, and Female Empowerment in Computer Games' at <http://www.maj.arts.qut.au/units/mjb336/history/2000/ltheodor/> (1 March 2001).

³¹ These screenshots are taken from the pre-Luclin version of the game. The Luclin expansion included a significant reworking of the game's graphics which completely altered how avatars and objects in the world appeared. Indeed, the graphical revision of the female avatars post-Luclin even more dramatically present hypersexualized forms. A common joke heard after the expansion came out was that the biggest change to the game art was in the amount female avatars' breasts grew.

³² Edmonds, p. 2.

- ³³ Kiaora Kordama, 'Swords and Bikinis: The Portrayal of Women in EverQuest,' *EQWomen.co.uk* (2001) at <http://fp.kiaora.plus.com/reviews/bikinis.htm> (6 April 2002).
- ³⁴ This point is actually not seen as unique to women and game designers are aware of the desire of many of their users to have more choices about how they look. As Brad McQuaid notes: 'Players want to be able to configure their character's appearance'. From Trey Walker, 'Brad McQuaid Interview,' *GameSpot* (14 January 2002) at <http://gamespot.com/gamespot/stories/news/0,10870,2838404,00.html> (6 April 2002).
- ³⁵ Tryne, *EQWomen.co.uk* (2001).
- ³⁶ This is an interesting reversal from the way designers often imagine who their users might be. For more on this subject, see Jerome McDonough, 'Designer Selves: Construction of Technologically Mediated Identity within Graphical, Multiuser Virtual Environments,' *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 50, no. 10 (1999).
- ³⁷ Patricia J. Williams, p. 6.
- ³⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984); Mike Featherstone et al (eds.), *The Body: Social Processes and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage, 1991); Michael Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City: Anchor, 1959); Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Marcel Mauss, *Sociology and Psychology: Essays* (London: Routledge, 1950); Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 1993); Bryan Turner, *The Body & Society* (London: Sage, 1996); Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (London: Routledge, 1998).
- ³⁹ Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 1.
- ⁴⁰ Allyson D. Polsky, 'Skins, Patches, and Plug-ins: Becoming Women in the New Gaming Culture,' *Genders* (Fall 2001), paragraph 10.
- ⁴¹ Several researchers have begun to explore the ways status systems and hierarchies express themselves in virtual worlds. Sometimes traditional forms reassert themselves but there are also instances where new values emerge, undermining the myth of online life as inherently non-hierarchical. See, for example, Mikael Jakobsson, 'Rest in Peace, Bill the Bot: Death and Life in Virtual Worlds,' in *The Social Life of Avatars: Human Interaction in Virtual Worlds*, ed. R. Schroeder (London: Springer-Verlag, 2002) and Elizabeth Reid, 'Hierarchy and Power: Social Control in Cyberspace,' in *Communities in Cyberspace*, eds. Marc Smith and Peter Kollack (London: Routledge, 1999).
- ⁴² For more on the subject of design and values, see Rob Kling, 'Information and Computer Scientists as Moral Philosophers and Social Analysts' in *Computerization and Controversy: Value Conflicts and Social Choices* (second edition), ed. Rob Kling (San Diego: Academic Press, 1996); Beth Kolko, 'Erasing @race: Going White in the (Inter)Face,' in *Race in Cyberspace*, eds. Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gil B. Rodman (New York: Routledge, 2000); Lawrence Lessig, *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace* (New York: Basic Books, 1999); Jerome P. McDonough, 'Designer Selves: Construction of Technologically Mediated Identity within

Graphical, Multiuser Virtual Environments,' *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 50, no. 10 (1999); Lisa Nakamura, 'Race In/For Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet,' *Works and Days*, 13, nos. 1 and 2 (1995), pp. 181-193; T.L. Taylor, 'Intentional Bodies: Virtual Environments and the Designers Who Shape Them,' *International Journal of Engineering Education*, forthcoming.

⁴³ Kathryn Wright, 'GDC 2000: Race and Gender in Games,' *Womengamers.com* (2001) at

<http://www.womengamers.com/articles/racegender.html> (6 April 2002).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Funk, p. 3.

⁴⁶ From personal correspondence with the author, 1 October 2002.

⁴⁷ Brenda Laurel, *Utopian Entrepreneur* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p. 36.

⁴⁸ Henry Jenkins, "'Complete Freedom of Movement': Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces' in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 291. His suggestion, quite importantly, is also about refiguring how we convince of masculine identity and needs. He continues by saying: 'Boys may need to play in secret gardens or toy towns just as much as girls need to explore adventure islands' (p. 292).

⁴⁹ Justine Cassell, 'Storytelling as a Nexus of Change in the Relationship between Gender and Technology: A Feminist Approach to Software Design' in *From Barbie to Mortal Kombat: Gender and Computer Games*, eds. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 299.