

6 Maps of Digital Desires: Exploring the Topography of Gender and Play in Online Games

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In one corner of the game *World of Warcraft*, forty players have just gathered in Molten Core to begin their weekly raid. Every Friday night, these players spend five to ten hours working together to defeat the same series of increasingly difficult monsters. Tonight, a sixty-year-old female player is raiding with her granddaughter on her lap and the baby's gurgles are heard over the VoIP channel amid commands to "hold aggro dammit." Over in the game *Eve Online*, infiltrators inside a leading corporation are moments away from assassinating the CEO and emptying the resource and equipment stores in a synchronized heist (Francis 2006). And in a small, undecorated room in the Chinese province of Fuzhou, four teenage boys are rushing to meet their daily quota of virtual gold while evading the systematic harassment from Western players who have branded them as "Chinese gold farmers." These are a few glimpses of the structured and emergent play in the digital constructs known as massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs, or MMOs for short).

In talking about gender and gaming, we often hear assumptions that men and women simply prefer different kinds of games. These assumptions echo a growing body of literature suggesting that our evolutionary past has engineered much of our current social behavior (e.g., Diamond 1998; Wright 1995), including why we play games (Steen and Owens 2001). These accounts also tend to propose hardwired biological differences stemming from different challenges for men and women in our evolutionary past (Low 2001). Indeed, game designer Chris Crawford (2005) explicitly argued that men and women prefer different kinds of video games because of how we lived in the Pleistocene savannas. These arguments lead us to believe that creating games for the "female brain" is the only sensible solution to attracting women to play video games; there is a particular set of "feminine" game mechanics that we simply haven't found or perfected yet.

In this chapter, I offer data from a study of MMO players that challenge this assumption. Talking about game play simply as a function of desire ignores the fact that legitimate social access to video gaming differs for men and women. In fact, particularly for multiplayer games, game mechanics may not be the main problem at all. Women in many MMOs perceive the game culture rather than the game mechanics to be the primary deterrent to potential female gamers.

The Survey Study

The data presented here were collected from a series of ongoing online surveys as part of The Daedalus Project (Yee, 2007a). Links to these surveys are publicized on Web portals catering to specific games and portals catering to MMO gamers in general. Respondents from past surveys are also notified of the available surveys. Most of the surveys contain both open-ended and multiple-choice questions and usually take about five to ten minutes to complete. Approximately two thousand to four thousand respondents participate in each survey phase. The more popular MMOs were targeted over the past six years, which have included games such as *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, *Dark Age of Camelot*, *Star Wars Galaxies*, *City of Heroes*, and *World of Warcraft*. Over the past six years, more than forty thousand MMO players have participated in the study.

The Physical and Social Context of Play

The topography of play in MMOs is multilayered; it is a dynamic territory shaped by social and physical access, individual motivations, and other in-game and out-of-game contexts, creating an uneven terrain that presents different navigational challenges depending on the player. As Carr (2005) has noted, “preferences are an assemblage, made up of past access and positive experiences, and subject to situation and context.” Thus, play isn’t simply about what players like to do in the game, but also about what constrains their access to games, how they were introduced to the game, and whom they play with. As Lin (this volume) describes, we need to take into account the external physical and social context of online play because sometimes these locations constrain whether we can play at all. Kafai (this volume) intentionally blurs

the boundaries between virtual and physical play by bringing kids together in an after-school club to play online in *Whyville*. Our social contexts constrain how we play, with whom we play, and what we play. I use the survey data to describe the demographic profile of MMO players. In particular, I articulate out-of-game contextual gender differences such as how men and women gain social access to MMOs.

Basic Demographics

According to the survey's responses, the large majority of MMO players are male (85.4%). The average age is twenty-six; the median is twenty-five, with a range from eleven to sixty-eight. Female players are considerably older than male players in MMOs. Forty-four percent of male players are age twenty-two or younger, compared with 20 percent of female players. Overall, about 50 percent of MMO players work full-time, and 36 percent are married. About 80 percent of female players and 60 percent of male players indicated that they were in a stable romantic relationship in real life (i.e., dating, engaged, or married). What these numbers show is that the overall demographic composition of MMO users is relatively diverse (except for gender), and does not consist primarily of adolescents. In fact, it also includes college students, early adult professionals, middle-aged homemakers, as well as retirees. On average, respondents spend twenty-two hours each week in an MMO. The median was twenty hours per week—the equivalent of half a workweek. There were no significant gender or age differences in usage patterns; players over the age of forty play on average just as much as players under the age of twenty.

Introduction to Games

While women are severely underrepresented in MMOs, women who play MMOs play for the same amount of time as men do. One potential reason for the underrepresentation of female players in MMOs may be social context including limited social access points to introduce women to MMOs as well as social dynamics within the game (how female players are treated). Social norms and perceptions may govern access to video games for women in ways that are different from men. The following analyses reveal how access points to these games may be different for men and women. Earlier, we note that

female players in MMOs are older than male players. One possible explanation for this age difference may lie in how players are introduced to MMOs. While about 27 percent of female players were introduced to the game by a romantic partner, only 1 percent of male players were introduced in this way. If we assume that people in stable romantic relationships tend to be older, and a romantic partner who plays is a primary mechanism for introducing women to MMOs, this helps to explain why there are fewer young female players.

Playing Together

A related difference can be seen in the number of players who play an MMO with someone they know in real life. Overall, about 25 percent of players play an MMO with their romantic partner. Female players are more likely to be playing with a romantic partner than male players (see figure 6.1). About two-thirds of female gamers are playing with a romantic partner, while less than one-fifth of male gamers are.

These survey findings resonate with those from ethnographic data research by Jenson and de Castell (2005) where initial trends suggested that “for most women, transgressing gender ‘norms’ in relation to playing games, occurs most frequently when it is legitimated by male relations (boyfriends, cousins, brothers and fathers)” (p. 4). The survey findings are congruent with this observation. Some women gain legitimate initial social access points into MMOs and allocate time toward MMO play via male relations. Responses

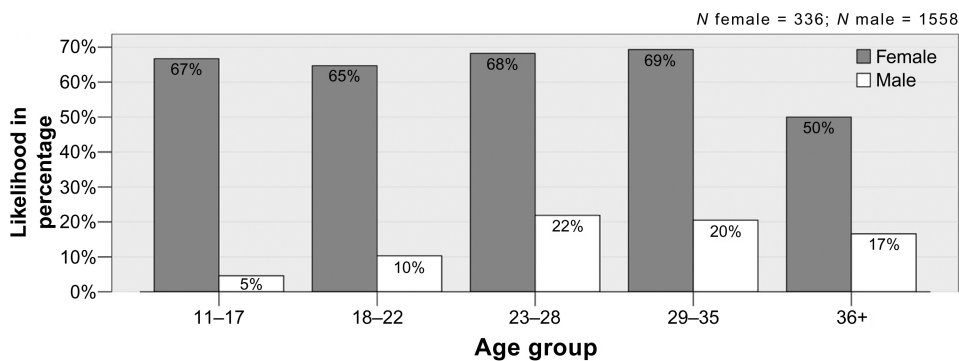


Figure 6.1 Likelihood of playing with a romantic partner (by age and gender).

from female gamers to open-ended questions in the surveys also suggest that female gamers are very aware of the legitimizing effects of male relations.

I find that most people do not think female players in game are really female unless you have your significant other (husband, boyfriend, roommate) playing the game, too. I think most people in game assume that 98% of all players are male and the other 2% are girlfriends/wives who were dragged along into the game—that it's not something a girl would want to do. (*World of Warcraft*, female, 38)

Many also seem to assume that I play with my boyfriend or husband, and are surprised when I tell them that I played MMOs long before my former boyfriend started playing *City of Heroes*, and that he doesn't play EQ at all. (*EverQuest*, female, 24)

These two anecdotes, examples of many similar comments, highlight that acceptable social access to online games differs considerably between men and women. Men are allowed relatively free access to online games, but a woman's presence in an online game is seen as legitimate only if it occurs via a relationship with a man. Other male players use a female player's relationship with a man as a means to legitimate her actual biological sex, to know whether a player claiming to be female is indeed a woman in real life. Playing an MMO as part of a romantic relationship also helps female players justify long hours spent playing; she is nurturing her romantic relationship as well as (presumably) having fun. Thus, these male relations legitimate both their initial entry and ongoing presence in an MMO. This parallels one of Lin's observations of cybercafés in Taiwan (this volume); most girls are unwilling to enter a cybercafé unless accompanied by a male friend. Together, these stories imply that physical and social barriers to entry for women become misinterpreted as a lack of desire to play video games. The twisted logic legitimates both the *want* and the *should* of playing MMOs for female players, but this logic is ultimately predicated on the assumption that women neither inherently want to play or should be playing MMOs on their own. Under this logic, the "unnatural" phenomenon of women wanting to play video games for many hours a week occurs as a side effect of their male relations. This mind-set is probably not very appealing to female gamers who want to enter these gaming spaces.

Thus, playing a game isn't simply about what we want to play; it's about how we gain initial and ongoing access to these spaces because men and women have very different legitimate social access points to online games and these determine quite frequently what each of them will play.

Co-Located Play

Finally, there is also a significant difference in the physical play settings of male and female gamers that ties into the general trends we have seen so far. Female gamers are about twice as likely to be playing with someone else in the same room than are male gamers (see figure 6.2). Men are more likely to be playing alone.

These findings illustrate that context matters when we talk about gender and gaming. Gaming isn't simply about what we want to play, but it also depends on what social access points are available to us. It is also important to keep in mind that these contextual differences in turn shape how we play. Playing with your romantic partner at your side might encourage more social-oriented play than playing alone. Or, for example, men who introduce their girlfriends to the game might encourage them to play support roles (e.g., healers) to facilitate their own game play. Studying current male and female gamers to understand what games may appeal to female gamers might inadvertently lead us to mistake the *how* for the *why*.

Moreover, the emphasis on creating games for the “female brain” ignores the fact that desire is not the only factor in what games we play. The above

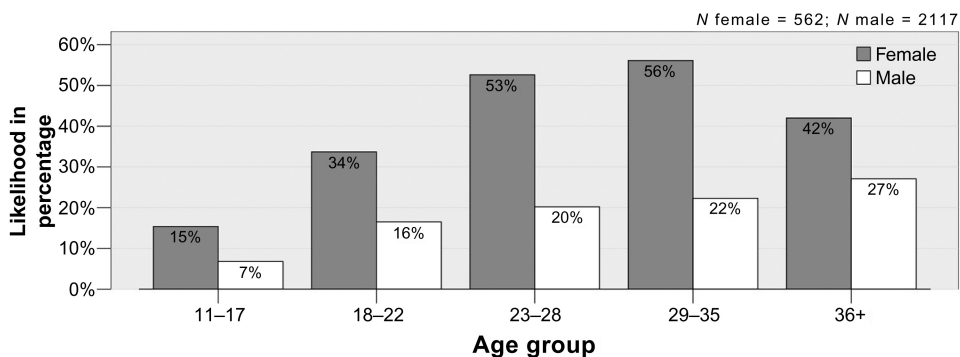


Figure 6.2 Likelihood of co-located play (by age and gender).

survey data of MMO players suggest that access points into online games can be incredibly gendered. And perhaps women are underrepresented in certain game genres not because they don't like those games but because male players who dominate many physical and social access points actively discourage women from entering. As the following incident illustrates, homes are not the only places where constraints to social access occur. At the workshop for this book at University of California, Los Angeles, Ubisoft's *Frag Dolls'* Morgan Romine, a professional woman gamer, described walking into the local EB Games to pick up a new Nintendo DS game. When Romine approached the counter, the cashier asked, "So who are you getting this for?" She recalled a similar experience when she was preordering *Halo 2*. After the clerk chatted with her a bit, he exclaimed, "Wait—you're ordering this for yourself?" It is ironic that the game industry is trying so hard to appeal to female gamers even as they remain so adamant that women don't play video games.

Motivations for Play in MMOs

Many people assume that men and women prefer different kinds of game play. In this section, I present data on motivations for play among MMO gamers that challenge the assumption that there are dramatic differences between men and women in terms of what games they might enjoy playing. Over the years, I've noticed that when MMO players are asked why they play, the responses reveal a large array of varied motivations. Indeed, this variation suggests that one reason why MMOs are so popular may be that there are many subgames embedded within a larger system.

After many weeks of watching I found myself interested in the interactions between people in the game, it was totally absorbing! The fact that I was able to immerse myself in the game and relate to other people or just listen in to the "chatter" was appealing. (*Dark Age of Camelot*, female, 34)

There's a certain satisfaction to be had from leveling, I find. While there ARE things much more enriching and rewarding than mindless leveling, there's a certain . . . feeling of zen to be found in the grind. I've spent hours on end in the same area, doing the same thing over and over,

watching the exp bar creep slowly upwards . . . Just soloing, just me and the monsters. (*City of Heroes*, female, 22)

Currently, I am trying to establish a working corporation within the economic boundaries of the virtual world. Primarily, to learn more about how real world social theories play out in a virtual economy. (*Eve Online*, male, 30)

Being able to articulate these underlying motivational differences is the precursor to exploring more complex behaviors and interactions in these environments. For example, are certain kinds of players more likely to become guild leaders? Or are certain players more likely to develop problematic usage patterns? To create an empirical framework of motivations for play among MMO gamers, I used a factor-analytic approach, which yielded ten motivations (see table 6.1) grouped into achievement, social, and immersion components (Yee, 2007b).

Examining Gender Differences

This resulting framework reveals the diversity of play in MMOs. There is no one kind of MMO player. The same model emerges whether we include the whole sample, or perform the analysis separately for male and female players. As Taylor has noted (2003), women (and men) play MMOs for many

Table 6.1 Factor Analysis Framework for MMO Play Motivations

Achievement	Social	Immersion
Advancement progress, power, accumulation, status	Socializing casual chat, helping others, making friends	Discovery exploration, lore, finding hidden things
Mechanics numbers, optimization, templating, analysis	Relationship personal, self-disclosure, find and give support	Role-Playing story line, character history, roles, fantasy
Competition challenging others, provocation, domination	Teamwork collaboration, groups, group achievements	Customization appearances, accessories, style, color schemes
		Escapism relax, escape from real life, avoiding real-life problems

reasons. It isn't the case that women play only for socializing or that men play only to kill monsters. On the other hand, there are gender differences in these self-identified motivations. Male players score higher in the Advancement, Mechanics, and Competition motivations, while female players score higher in the Relationship and Customization motivations. There were very small or no gender differences in the other five motivations—Socializing, Teamwork, Discovery, Role-Playing, and Escapism. Even though statistical differences emerged, the data show that there are far more commonalities than differences. It is important to remember that significant differences on Gaussian distributions nevertheless usually imply a large overlap range. For example, even in the motivation with the largest statistical gender difference (Mechanics), the overlap between men and women was 66 percent. The average gender overlap across all the listed motivations was actually 87 percent: the overwhelming majority of men and women like to do the same kinds of things in online games. An attempt to identify play motivations that appeal to the “female brain” might be solving a problem that doesn't actually exist.

The results of the factor analysis also reveal that assumed gender differences should be largely attributed to other factors. For example, men are stereotyped as being more achievement-oriented than women in video games. Within this MMO study, the desire to achieve in games is in fact better explained by age than by gender. A multiple regression reveals that age accounts for significantly more variation in the achievement motivation than gender does. What the multiple regression shows is that differences in how competitive or power-driven a player is are better explained by age than gender. Players are less likely to be achievement-driven in video games as they get older. As we see in the previous section, female players in MMOs tend to be older than male players. Thus, a pure gender comparison without taking into account the underlying age differences between male and female players would have inflated the apparent gender difference. Given the nontrivial role that age plays in motivations for playing MMOs, it is ironic that so much attention has focused on gender alone.

Other interesting findings also emerge from the data set. For example, whereas one might have expected a large gender difference in the Socializing motivation, the results show a small difference. Men like to chat, gossip, and talk just as much in these games as women do. The same is true for the Role-Playing motivation. Some researchers had identified storytelling and character

investment as important forms of play for women (Brunner, Bennett, and Honey 1998), but this motivation is only slightly more important for women than it is for men. And as we've noted, even where we do see gender differences, such as in the Achievement component, these differences are in fact more strongly driven by age than gender.

Thoughts from current female MMO players on gendered motivations for playing these games dovetail with the results presented here. The main theme that emerged was that MMOs offer such varied styles of play that there is bound to be something for most players.

I think that there is a very definite difference in the way that men and women approach online games. However, the games themselves tend to be so flexible that all styles can be accommodated quite easily. (*Eve Online*, female, 35)

Others commented that the beauty of MMOs is that these games may hook in new players for stereotypical gendered reasons, but once players are there, they may be tempted to try out and enjoy the other things these games offer. In other words, MMOs have the potential to broaden game playing for both men and women.

I know plenty of females that wouldn't consider themselves gamers that easily pick up (and get addicted to) these games. I think that's also why WoW is starting to gain female gamers: some come for the socialization aspect, and stay for the fun. :) (*World of Warcraft*, female, 24)

One central dilemma for the girl games movement is figuring out how to get there from here without only creating stereotypically gendered games and perpetuating gender stereotypes. While some have suggested that MMOs may be more appealing to women because of the storytelling or socialization elements, I'd argue that the importance of MMOs lies in their ability to potentially broaden the game-playing scope of its players. Once committed to playing, women who initially play to chat may eventually find slaying dragons enjoyable. And men who initially play to slaughter innocent rabbits may eventually find sustaining social relationships enjoyable. MMOs are thus potential gateways for both male and female players.

Social and Cultural Deterrents in MMOs

Playing a video game isn't only about desire; playing a game is always shaped by our physical and social access points (whether that game is football or *World of Warcraft*). And even if gaming were simply a matter of desire, men and women actually share roughly the same desires. The burden now falls on me to explain why the current games aren't attracting more women. After all, if it's not an issue of motivation, then why do female players only account for 15 percent of the MMO population? Unfortunately, current MMOs are not gender-inclusive utopias. There are many social and cultural constraints for women who enter these spaces. In a recent survey, I asked female gamers about what they saw as potential deterrents to female gamers in the MMO they played. Almost every respondent cited the proportions and clothing options of the female avatars as problematic.

The only really off-putting detail is that it's ludicrous that every time my elf fights, her breasts stick out to the side repeatedly. It is a constant reminder to me that this game is made for 13 year old boys, or men who still think like them. (*World of Warcraft*, female, 42)

To a certain extent, this encourages players to think about women as token spectacles rather than actual players. In fact, players are often assumed to be men unless proven otherwise. As we've noted, however, the legitimacy of a player's real-life gender is a by-product of male relations. Thus, many female players described experiences where other players simply did not believe they were actually female.

But every once in a while, I seem to meet someone who wants to violently deny that I am who I am. And how am I supposed to respond to a charge of "You are not a girl!"—I can't exactly flash ID or body parts to prove it. (*World of Warcraft*, female, 36)

For many of these female players, the problem with being in an MMO is that they are constantly reminded of the intended male subject position they are trespassing upon. On top of this, the male-dominated player culture itself becomes a deterrent—something that isn't an issue in single-player games.

There are things that happen in-game that make me embarrassed, as a woman and as a person who tries to be socially responsible, to be playing. For example, male players will talk about getting “raped” without really thinking about it, things that happen will be referred to as “gay,” which is offensive, people do crude things to player corpses in PvP [Player vs. Player settings], etc. (*World of Warcraft*, female, 29)

More important, many female players have learned that it is dangerous to reveal your real-life gender in MMOs because they will be branded as incompetent and constantly propositioned; In other words, they must either accept the male-subject position silently, or risk constant discrimination and harassment if they reveal that they are female.

When I played EQ, I was so sick and tired of being treated like a moron or hit on 24–7 that I made a male character. The way people treat female chars and males in EQ was drastic, I had immediate respect. When on a female char, men think you don’t know how to play, can’t be hardcore, and try to give you things to hit on you. Its annoying to say the least. (*World of Warcraft*, female, 35)

It is unfortunate that much of what has been brought up in this section has little to do with the game mechanics themselves. Desire isn’t the only thing that brings someone to play a game. And mismatched desire is not the only thing that keeps them away. It isn’t the achievement-oriented game play that drives women away from MMOs as much as the player culture itself—elements of the metagame rather than the game code.

Conclusion

Focusing on desire in game play sidelines important elements while privileging factors that may be simply distracting. My surveys of current MMO players, as well as the research conducted by Lin and Kafai (this volume), suggest that online play is always a contextual combination of social and physical access. The reality is that those men and women who currently play online games are overwhelmingly similar in terms of what they like to do in them. And stereotypical assumptions of gendered motivations are either nonsignificant

(i.e., Socializing), or are dwarfed by differences in age (as in the case of the Achievement motivation). Attention should be paid to including game mechanics appealing to older and younger players, in addition to masculine and feminine motivations.

And finally, the emphasis on finding an inclusive set of game mechanics that appeal to and can be enjoyed by female and male gamers ignores other more important deterrents from current games. As the narratives from current female MMO players illustrate, gender bias can be coded into games and perpetuated via the game culture in ways that have nothing to do with actual game-play mechanics. Understanding why there aren't more women in gaming cannot be answered by questions that simply focus on game mechanics.

Ultimately, MMOs are an interesting game genre to think about not because of the particular game-play styles they provide but for the breadth of styles that can coexist in the same system. These environments make it possible to shift from combat to customization to socialization in a coherent way. Thus, it's interesting to think of MMOs as being able to broaden the scope of gamers' play motivations—for both men and women. Also, there are very few other places (in physical or virtual worlds) where high-school students are collaborating with professors, retired war veterans, and stay-at-home moms. Despite the constraints of our current MMOs, I am hopeful that future iterations will help foster a more gender-inclusive sensibility by encouraging gamers to broaden their perspectives and desires.

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