Performative Identity and the Embodied Avatar:
An Online Ethnography of Final Fantasy XIV

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I confirm that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

During the period of registration, I have presented findings at three conferences, however, none have appeared in publications.

Abstract

This thesis explores the performative enactment of identity and embodiment through an online ethnography of the online game Final Fantasy XIV. It is argued that online identity must be viewed as performative, that is, enacted through speech and action, and embodied via the avatar, which acts as a body project for the player. The avatar identity is also constrained by the notion of authentic identity, which denotes how a single body is expected to hold a single identity. The thesis makes contributions to three areas. Firstly, in substantive terms, the thesis contributes original sociological knowledge of online social interaction, drawn from an online game and its related spaces, which remain under-researched sociologically. Secondly, the thesis makes a theoretical contribution through a theoretical framing of how online, embodied identity is achieved in an online game in a performative fashion, which is centred on the body of the avatar, coupled with the speech and actions of the player. Finally, the thesis also offers a methodological contribution through its original use of photo elicitation in online interviews, and furthers the debates around (online) ethnography. An 11 month programme of fieldwork was undertaken, comprising 36 asynchronous, image elicitation interviews, extensive participant observation of the game over the 11 months, and observation of the official forum lasting nearly six months. The thesis concludes that online identity and embodiment in these spaces are heavily constrained by norms drawn from everyday life, such as heteronormativity, and racism. The game design is also influenced by the developers' norms and values, such as the avatar appearance. The possibilities for performative identity and embodiment are severely constrained by the community, who reify the game space as separate from "real" life and reject the inclusion of non-normative avatars.

Chapter 1 Introduction

In the last decade, online video games[1] have become very popular, with millions of subscribers globally, but they remain under-researched sociologically. Social interaction online has been increasingly researched over the last two decades (e.g. Rheingold, 1994; Baym, 1998; Markham, 1998; Dibbell, 1999; Hine, 2000; Kolko et al., 2000; Nakamura, 2002), and online games are no exception. Ethnographic accounts such as Boellstorff (2008), Taylor (2006), and Pearce and Artemesia (2009) point to the rich and varied environments that these games provide, and the ways in which players[2] use them. Nevertheless, gaps remain in the research in particular areas of identity and embodiment, which this study seeks to examine.

Though some of the earliest work on online spaces[3] concerned identity (e.g. Turkle, 1995; Danet, 1998), in some respects online[4] identity has been under-theorised and neglected in regard to online gaming. Much research into online games and worlds make the claim that the avatar, the humanoid representative of the player (Taylor, 2002), conveys an identity to others (e.g. Taylor, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008), yet this has not been adequately theorised. This study argues that a performative approach to identity can offer insight into how identity is enacted online, especially in relation to online gaming. Such an approach considers how speech and actions enact identity in an on-going fashion, giving the illusion of stability to identity. Where online interaction takes place primarily through chat, a performative approach to identity

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[1] While online game/video game can refer to multiple types of games, this study uses the terms specifically with Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), which are defined in more detail in the following sections.
[2] Participants in such games are normally either referred to as player or gamer. This study uses the two interchangeably.
[3] As a rule, this study uses the term online spaces as it uses websites and online games, which are different areas of the internet and are experienced in various ways – one through text and one through an avatar. Further discussion of this can be found in chapter three.
[4] For conceptual clarity, the study uses online/offline rather than real/virtual.

can be beneficial. Moreover, the lack of visible body is often considered to be the source of risky behaviour online, as users cannot be held accountable in the same way as offline (van Zoonen, 2013). Claims have also been made that this lack could mean that social difference could be erased online (Turkle, 1995), however this does not seem to be the case (Kendall, 2002). By examining an online space that necessitates the use of an embodied avatar, the claim that internet[5] use is disembodied seems contradictory. Instead, this speaks to concerns raised by van Zoonen (2013), who suggests that the notion of authentic identity holds sway online, where the internet user is expected to maintain a single identity stemming from a single body. To this end, it seems more important to examine what can be learnt from an online game that requires embodied avatars, and how players use their knowledge of embodied social interaction to guide their experiences online.

Gender, sexuality and 'race' have also been neglected in relation to online gaming. This study uses an intersectional approach to such aspects of identity, noting how the three overlap and affect each other. The term intersectionality was coined by feminists to denote how different women face oppression depending on intersections of identity, such as gender, 'race' and class (Crenshaw, 1991). In gaming research, gender has mostly been considered from the perspective of the player's gender, such as the lack of self-defined female players (e.g. Taylor, 2006; Bertozzi, 2008), or the exoticisation of self-defined male players who use female avatars (Hussain and Griffiths, 2008; Huh and Williams, 2010). Sexuality is also severely under-researched in this area (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012). This study seeks to redress this through the use of Butler's (1990) interpretation of heteronormativity, which

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[5] This study uses "internet" rather than "Internet" in the sense outlined by Baym and Markham (2009), who hold it should not be a proper noun, which would otherwise "lead to granting the internet agency and power that are better granted to those who develop and use it," (fn 1, p.vii).

notes how heterosexuality is assumed to be the norm, and structures gender so that biological sex and gender must be coherent to be intelligible in society. Heteronormativity has the potential to be a useful conceptual tool in examining how gender and sexuality are framed online. 'Race' (as in the social category) and game race[6] are both neglected in online game research, though game race has received more attention, such as the dominance of the fantasy canon and its effect on the possible types of races in online games (Higgin, 2009; Galloway, 2012). Rather, it seems important to consider how game race and 'race' are intertwined, and how players perpetuate these ideas. By examining both of these more closely, the socio-cultural context of online gaming can be outlined in greater depth, in terms of both the game itself, and the players who participate in it. Gaming culture, which concerns the norms of the subculture around gaming, can also shape player identity, where players pride themselves on their skill and approach to gaming (Taylor, 2006). The community within an online game can also have its own distinctive character and norms that affect how identity can be enacted.

The concerns of this study can be whittled down to three questions, which are answered in the course of the thesis.

- How is online identity both performed and embodied?

- How do notions of authenticity shape the possibilities for performative online identities?

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[6] In online games, the term race has been used in the sense found in Tolkien's books to define how different humanoid groups diverge. Species could be equally valid for example. Different races include Elves, Dwarves and Humans.

- How do heteronormativity, gaming culture and stereotypical notions of game race and the social category 'race' shape the possibilities for online, embodied, performative identities?

1.1 Background: The Rise of Video Games and Online Games

Video games and gaming as a culture have become steadily more important since the 1970s. The growth of arcade machines established a space for gaming in towns and cities with the likes of Space Invaders and Pong (Crawford, 2012). However, video games gained more momentum as they became part of home life through video game consoles, such as the early Atari consoles in the 1970s, and later the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) released in the 1980s. Atari sold tens of millions of consoles and games in the 1970s and were widely seen as one of the most successful start-up companies of the decade (Dyer-Witherford and de Peuter, 2009). Though Atari survives today as a game company, its initial dominance in the market faltered in the early 1980s as a result of the recession in the gaming market due to poor quality games, such as the widely derided ET video game based on the film, and bootlegging of cartridges. Around the same time, Nintendo, previously a manufacturer of playing cards, was venturing into the home console market with its Nintendo Entertainment System (NES). Coupled with the later growth of Sega and Sony, the video game industry became dominated by Japanese companies well into the 1990s (ibid.). For example, Nintendo's Super NES console was released in 1992 and sold 46 million units worldwide, along with millions of copies of the popular Mario and Zelda games (Nintendo, 2012). Later, Sony's PlayStation (released in 1994) and PlayStation 2 (released in 2000) consoles both broke records for the fastest sales of 100 million units, the former in just under ten years, the latter in nearly six years (Sony Computer Entertainment, 2005). Thus during the course of

the 1990s and 2000s, the video game industry came into its own, with increasing sales year on year. Though Nintendo and Sony remain influential, especially through Nintendo's DS and 3DS handheld consoles, Microsoft's Xbox 360 has become the dominant force in the console market, with 76 million consoles sold by February 2013 since launch in 2005 (Microsoft, 2013). The gaming industry is now valued at $68 billion annually, with well over hundreds of millions of active video game players globally, using consoles, home computers, as well as the proliferation of mobile phone gaming (McGonigal, 2011). Many of the top video games sell millions of copies, including the Grand Theft Auto series (125 million), the Call of Duty series (100 million), and the Mario series (400 million) (all figures: VGChartz.com, 2013). It has thus been suggested that the video game industry regularly surpasses Blu-Ray and DVD sales, recorded music sales (digital and physical), and cinema box office sales (Chatfield, 2010).

Against this backdrop of growing sales, online gaming has emerged as a significant aspect of the industry. The beginnings of online games are often traced to Roy Trubshaw and Richard Bartle's MUD1, created in 1978-9 at the University of Essex (Boellstorff, 2008). This was the first multiuser dungeon (MUD) and loosely based on the popular Dungeons and Dragons board game. It was entirely text-based and permitted users to pursue an adventure and communicate with others via computer networks and internet connections. A series of similar spaces, including TinyMUD, and more social-based spaces such as LambdaMOO, grew in importance throughout the 1980s and 1990s to the point where they accounted for 10 per cent of online traffic prior to 1993 when the World Wide Web was created (ibid.). As internet connections became faster and more widespread, graphical online worlds emerged, such as Ultima Online released in 1997 (Chatfield, 2010). Rather than simple text-

based spaces describing the area to the player, fully rendered environments were included, as well as the first use of avatars. Graphical chat rooms also became popular, which allowed users to create an avatar to represent themselves to talk to others (Taylor, 2002).

This study is concerned with a particular type of online game, namely a Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG). These games have seen a surge in popularity in the last decade especially, with the advent of broadband speed internet connections. At its heart, an MMORPG is a huge game in which thousands of players can login from all over the world and play simultaneously on multiple servers[7]. Many are based on the fantasy genre, and involve group play to drive a narrative (Taylor, 2006). Players work to improve their avatar, which gains experience points (XP) by defeating monsters, and becomes more powerful over time. The avatar is also the main means of communicating with other players, as well as interacting with the game's environment (ibid.). To date, the most popular MMORPG is World of Warcraft, released in 2004, which had over 11 million subscribers at its peak in 2008 (Bainbridge, 2010). Other popular examples include EverQuest, EVE online, Star Wars: The Old Republic, and Final Fantasy XI and XIV. Final Fantasy XIV is the main game in this thesis and is interesting for a number of reasons.

Above, the research questions were outlined concerning the enactment of identity and embodiment, the effect of authenticity on the possibilities for identity, and how different social norms constrain the enactment of identity. This particular game offers an interesting way to examine these questions. Players focus primarily on a

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[7] Game populations are broken down into servers, each with its own name. Avatars are stored as data on the server, as well as everything the avatar does, such as its movements and conversations. The avatar can only interact with others on the same server within the game.

single avatar in Final Fantasy XIV, unlike other games, where players often use multiple avatars. Final Fantasy XIV's pricing plan meant that players would have to pay extra for more avatars, which had been the case in Final Fantasy XI too. Consequently, the relationship between the avatar and the player is especially strong, and points to a more significant focus for the enactment of identity and embodiment. Moreover, given the concern with gender and heteronormativity in this thesis, Final Fantasy XIV seemed interesting as certain races are presented as mono-gendered, which is unusual in such games. The following section charts the history of the Final Fantasy series and details information about Final Fantasy XIV.

1.2 A Short History of Final Fantasy and the Release of Final Fantasy XIV

The first Final Fantasy game was released in Japan in 1987 for the NES. Its creator, Hironobu Sakaguchi, has explained that the title related to the risk of creating the game. Square, the development company he worked for, was under threat of bankruptcy and had the game failed, he would have had to quit and return to university (Fear, 2007). Since then, Final Fantasy games have been released on a regular basis for various consoles, but only penetrating the Euro-American market in the late 1990s with Final Fantasy VII, which was released in 1997 on PlayStation. Square Enix, the current development company following a merger, has stated that the 46 titles in the series, comprising console releases, re-releases and handheld console spin-offs, have surpassed 100 million units sold globally (Square Enix, 2013).

Final Fantasy games are widely praised for their narrative, which typically involve a group of people facing a life-threatening situation. For example, Final Fantasy VII features a world facing environmental disaster after the actions of a corporation

named Shinra threaten to destroy the world. A group of people band together to search for a way to stop Shinra and restore balance, before it is too late. The series is also known for its distinctive play style, where players must approach strategic battles using a group of three or four characters to defeat groups of enemies using a combination of physical attacks and magic. Over time, battles become more complex, and the player has to plan their strategy in advance, as well as seeking the most powerful magic and weapons to complete the game. Final Fantasy was part of a popular wave of Japanese Role Playing Games (JRPGs), which came to prominence in the late 1990s (Consalvo, 2012). At the time, Euro-American games were perceived as less sophisticated, whereas JRPGs remain very emotionally involving, and challenging to play due to the strategies involved.

The majority of Final Fantasy games were designed for a single player only, until the release of Final Fantasy XI in 2002. As such, it was one of the earlier MMORPGs, and for a long time remained one of the only MMORPGs available in Japan. For the first year, it was limited to Japanese players, before being released in North America and Europe. Unlike its console counterparts, it was initially only available on PC, though later PlayStation 2 and Xbox 360 versions were added. At its peak, it counted two million subscribers in April 2009 (Play Online, 2009). Unlike the other games in the series, it retains more features from typical MMORPGs, whereby the player is represented as a single avatar, however virtually all content needs a team of players, unlike most MMORPGs, which include some single player content. However, it still keeps some elements of the Final Fantasy series, such as certain popular monsters and characters that span multiple games. It has had three expansion packs, which add content to the game, and another is due to be released in 2013. Final Fantasy XI is

still running, and was recently announced to be the most profitable Final Fantasy game ever (Moriarty, 2012).

Square Enix's next attempt at an MMORPG is Final Fantasy XIV, after XII and XIII, which were single player console games. It was released in September 2010, to a fairly mediocre reaction from the gaming media (Metacritic, 2010), despite a reasonably large player population, many of whom moved directly from Final Fantasy XI. The game is set on the continent of Eorzea encompassing three main zones:

Gridania, a dense forest city within the Black Shroud wood:

Figure 1 My avatar Rill in the Black Shroud Forest

Ul'dah, the desert city of Thanalan

Figure 2 My avatar Rill in Thanalan on the approach to the city of Ul'dah

and Limsa Lominsa, on the island of La Noscea.

Figure 3 My avatar Rill in Limsa Lominsa

The player begins within one of these three cities as an Adventurer who has travelled there from afar. At the outset of the game, the player creates an avatar to represent them in the game to other players, and to experience the game. The player must select gender, race and class, in addition to the avatar's facial features. Firstly, the player must select from five in-game races, which are loosely based on the main fantasy races that are normally referred to in MMORPGs. They are as follows:

Figure 4 The Hyur

These are the Human race in this game, divided into the Midlanders from the plains (left), and the Highlanders, from the mountains (right), who can only be male.

Figure 5 The Lalafell

The smallest race of the game, divided into the Dunesfolk who live in the desert (left), and the Plainsfolk (right).

Figure 6 The Elezen

The elven race within this game, who consist of the Wildwood from the forest (right), and Duskwight from the desert (left).

Figure 7 The Miqo'te

A feline race, who can only be female, and are divided into the Seekers of the Sun (left) and the Keepers of the Moon (right).

Figure 8 The Roegadyn

The largest race within the game, who can only be male, and are either Sea Wolves (left), or Hellsguard (right).

After selecting race, the player must choose gender, apart from the races which can only be one gender, as highlighted above. Gender is still binaristic for the other races, with only male or female options available. The next phase is finessing the avatar's appearance within a limited range, such as its height, and a limited number of facial alterations. The player must also decide on the class of the avatar, which in other games is sometimes referred to as a job. In MMORPGs, the player must select from a limited number of roles to pursue, such as soldiers, wizards, or non-combat roles such as gathering materials, or making items. Unusually, Final Fantasy XIV permits the player to do all of these, whereas other MMORPGs only allow a specific career path. Most of the players I interviewed have a preferred class, though they also try out many of the others. The classes can be divided as follows:

- Combat:
  - Pugilist (hand-to-hand)
  - Archer (bow and arrow)

- o Lancer (lance)

- o Gladiator (sword and shield)

- o Marauder (axes)

- Magic:

  - o Conjuror (protective magic and elemental spells)

  - o Thaumaturge (darker magic)

- Gathering:

  - o Botany (natural materials from trees)

  - o Mining (ores from rock formations)

  - o Fishing (fish and shellfish from lakes and rivers)

- Crafting:

  - o Blacksmith (weapons)

  - o Carpenter (wooden weapons)

  - o Alchemist (healing potions and crystals)

  - o Culinarian (food to heal the player)

  - o Armorer (metal armour)

  - o Goldsmith (jewellery)

  - o Leatherworker (leather items)

  - o Weaver (cloth-based items)

Figure 9 My avatar Rill fighting as a Pugilist

Figure 10 My avatar Ferdy casting spells as a Conjuror

Figure 11 My avatar Ferdy as a Carpenter

After deciding an initial class to pursue, the player finally adds a name and selects a server to play on. Though the game has thousands of players, the server is the main place for the avatar, with a limited number of players on each. Many MMORPGs have servers in particular parts of the world for players from those regions, such as North America, Europe and so on. Final Fantasy XIV is notable because its servers are not regional, and all servers are located in Tokyo.

1.3 Motivation For the Study and Contributions

Having played video games for many years, my impression of the research that has been conducted on gaming is that it does not necessarily reflect the reality of gaming in some respects. Gaming has certainly become a much more widespread phenomenon since I started playing as a child, but my early encounters with the research in this area tended to focus on the allegedly addictive qualities of gaming, and the problem of violent content (e.g. Anderson et al., 2007; Bushman and Anderson, 2009). Instead, it seemed as if there were many more ways of considering video games beyond such a limited range of ideas. Moreover, online gaming has grown in popularity in the last decade especially, which enable a much more sociable approach to gaming, given that thousands of players can participate in a game at the same time.

This study is timely and contributes to sociological knowledge in particular ways. Online game research remains emergent, especially in relation to sociology. Specifically, this study seeks to examine the context of this game and its players, in terms of the social situation of these players and their gaming experiences. The players of this game are drawn mostly from Final Fantasy XI, and tended to distance themselves from players of other games, which also means that their approach to

gaming is distinctive. In interviews, as well as on the forum, players sought to distinguish themselves as more culturally discerning, such as claiming themselves to be "nerdier". Aspects of the avatar's identity are important and deserve much closer attention, such as race and gender.

This study examines avatar gender more broadly than the research cited above, by referencing Butler's (1990) notion of heteronormativity. Her argument suggests that the heterosexual ideal needs to be upheld, where biological sex and gender must be congruent to be intelligible. I argue that this game's spaces are also heteronormative, and with the avatar, players hold that its gender must match the player's gender. Moreover, heteronormative gender is also important in relation to the notion of authentic identity, as put forward by Liesbet van Zoonen (2013). The earliest research on online identity suggested that chatroom users would be able to enact multiple identities online by using assorted chatrooms to portray themselves in different ways (Turkle, 1995). Though this view remained influential for a long time, it overemphasises the possibilities for identity to be disembodied and separated from the offline. Instead, this study examines the work of van Zoonen (2013), who has suggested that in the wake of 9/11, and the accompanying security crackdown, identity has to be perceived as authentic, which relates to how one body must be seen to hold a single identity. She gives the example of biometric passports, which signify how a constrained picture of an individual is believed to quantify key aspects of identity. With the internet, the emphasis shifts towards the single user on websites such as Facebook and Amazon, where a single person is expected to have a single profile. In online games, the gender of the avatar is tested to see if the player has an authentic identity, which means that the avatar and player gender must be congruent. Players must also select the race of their avatar, which relates to the appearance of

the avatar, but it is also treated in the same vein as 'race'. The player is expected to adhere to a set of stereotypes that are applied to each race within a performative framework. Players insist that some leeway is possible through so-called meta-roleplay, which enables them to consider the ways in which their avatar would think or act in a given situation. By examining these ideas, the thesis makes a considerable contribution to sociological knowledge around an online culture, as well as to theoretical understandings of online social interaction.

This study also makes an important methodological contribution. Online social research methods remain relatively under-developed (Murthy, 2008), but existing research methods still tend to be transferred online. These include discourse analysis (Garcia-Gomez, 2009), interviews (Orgad, 2005), and surveys (Williams et al., 2008). While it seems unlikely that the internet could necessarily spawn entirely new research methods, this study marks the first attempt using photo elicitation in online interviewing, to the best of my knowledge. Photo elicitation involves the use of photographs, either supplied by the respondent, or taken by the researcher, in the course of an interview (Pink, 2007). The photo is ideally meaningful to the respondent, and will provoke a conversation (Banks, 2001). Gamers often take screenshots of their avatars and their actions in games, which can be uploaded to websites to share with others. The interviews were designed to examine the process of creating an avatar, and the norms attributed to the identity enacted in this space, hence screenshots seemed very useful in the interview. Respondents were more comfortable with asynchronous means of contact, such as through emails, and these have been characterised as harder to conduct because of the spatio-temporal distance between the respondent and interviewer (James and Busher, 2006). Asynchronous interviews can thus take longer, or even tail off before completion. Image elicitation

using screenshots from the game offers another way of assisting with the interview and to keep the conversation going. Respondents could highlight particular events that were important to them, as well make points about the avatar. Visual methods have much to offer studies of the internet, considering how visual particular spaces are. Facebook last year pointed out that 300 million photos were being uploaded daily to users' profiles (Ambrust, 2012). It is thus important to make the most of opportunities to expand social research methods online, which this thesis has sought to achieve.

1.4 Outline of the Thesis

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter two consists of a review of the relevant literature, focusing on gaming research in particular. Initially, the broader aspects of gaming research are considered, such as the video game effects research, and the so-called ludological research, which analyses games in a similar fashion to literary criticism, or film studies. The chapter then turns to studies that take a more critical stance towards gaming, which examine the broader socio-cultural context in which gaming takes place. This includes a consideration of gaming in the domestic sphere, as well as how gender and 'race' are conceptualised in video games. It concludes that it is much more valuable to locate gaming in a socio-cultural context to better understand how identity can be enacted in online games.

Chapter three then examines the theoretical ideas that underpin this study, in relation to two of the main concerns: identity and embodiment. The first half examines the notion of performative identity and heteronormativity in the work of Butler (1990; 1993; 2004). It can be argued that online games are profoundly heteronormative,

through the insistence on congruent player and avatar gender, and that online identity is based on performative acts, that is, speech acts, or actions, which enact identity in so doing. This is then examined in relation to how online identity has been framed in the existing research. The second half of the chapter argues that the avatar is a form of embodiment, and how it can be studied theoretically. The avatar offers a way of interacting with others that set online games apart from textual online spaces, such as forums. I argue that the avatar represents a body project (Shilling, 2012), which relates to how the avatar signifies identity on its body. The player uses the avatar to signify different aspects of identity, such as their knowledge, skill, gender and race. All of these can be read from the avatar's body and are important in the performance of identity. I also put forward that embodied knowledge (Hayles, 1999) points to how performative identity can be enacted through the avatar, by referring to the player's existing understandings of movement and embodied social interaction.

Chapter four outlines the study's research design in detail, by examining each phase of the research process in turn. This included participant observation, online interviews, and forum observation. Considering the contribution made by the study around online methods, this chapter outlines in more depth how online social research can be accomplished, in such a way that the study's research aims are met, but also to further the debates around online research methods. The case is also put forward that this study constitutes an online ethnography of this particular game. My own insider status also played an important part of the study, which is also often preferred by some proponents of studying games (e.g. Aarseth, 2006). One section is thus concerned with the debates around insider/outsider status in social research, and the implications for the study. This chapter also details the study's poststructuralist

epistemological viewpoint, and sets out the ethics of each of the research methods used.

Chapter five is the first of three analysis chapters. Following the performative perspective on identity outlined in chapter three, this chapter focuses on how online identity in a game can be enacted. Initially, the primacy of social interaction in such games is examined, since players frame these games as sociable to the point where an avatar that does not respond to social interaction is believed to a "bot", which is a program used to control avatars. To be considered a "real" person, the player must therefore interact with others. The remainder of the chapter considers the ways in which players enact identity through the avatar via text-based chat and so-called emotes, which are embodied movements that mimic emotional responses, such as crying or laughing. These are used by the players to enact a performative identity.

Chapter six examines how gender and sexuality are framed in the game and its forum, to better understand how heteronormativity can be discerned in this space. Initially, players' accounts of selecting avatar gender are examined, through the avatar creation process. This is followed by a consideration of how gender switching with an avatar is viewed by the players of this game, and how the self-defined male players who switch gender in particular talk about their avatar. Sexuality is considered from a heteronormative perspective, by outlining how homophobia remains prevalent in these online spaces and limits the possibilities for gender and sexuality. This is also evident in players' discursive attempts to exclude homosexuality in particular to control the game space in ways that they cannot in everyday life. Heteronormativity is also the source of authentic identity testing, where players emphasise how the avatar gender needs to match the player's sex for the player to seem honest.

Chapter seven concerns game race and the category of 'race'. Initially, the reasons for selecting particular races are examined using respondents' opinions on the avatar creation process. The performative possibilities of game race are then considered from the perspective of meta-roleplay, a notion put forward by respondents who believed it represented a way of speaking through the avatar and "getting into character". I suggest that meta-roleplay is constrained by the stereotypes attached to each of the races, much like those associated with 'race', and offer only a limited means of expressing oneself. The notion of authentic identity in regard to race is slightly different, in that the avatar's race is centred on the body of the avatar, and the performative identity enacted must match the avatar's race, otherwise the avatar is believed to be acting "out of character". The final part of the chapter considers the exclusion of 'race' from the forum, much like the previously discussed exclusion of homosexuality. On the forum, 'race' was seen to be at odds with the fantasy canon, to which many of these games are related, and players emphasised the idea that a game provides escapism above all. Nevertheless, players would also bring 'race' into the game's spaces through discussions of the Japanese players' behaviour, which was often attributed to the stereotype of Japan's national insularity. Japanese players would sometimes mock the Euro-American players and tended to play in groups of just Japanese players. This led to debates on the forums around Japanese players, which deserves attention. By insisting that games are not racialised spaces, players maintain that games are separate to everyday life, and prevent discussions of 'race' in games.

Chapter eight is the concluding chapter, which sums up the findings of this study, as well as putting forward the recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2 Situating Gaming Socially: A Review of the Literature

This chapter examines the existing literature in this area, upon which this study builds, before turning to the theoretical aspect of the thesis in the following chapter. I argue that online and gaming cultures must be socially situated, to start to unpack the norms and stereotypes around gaming that also constrain performative identity in online games. To this end, the overview of the existing research is broadly divided into two strands: research that is concerned solely with games and play, and research that considers the fan culture around gaming. The former is critiqued for focusing too narrowly on the moment of play, which excludes important points about gaming, such as its social setting and the fan cultures that surround this pastime. In the first section, the ergodic, or ludological[8], approach is considered, which focuses on game design elements. The second section outlines the effects research, which makes claims about the potential risk from gaming. These are then evaluated to see how they can contribute to a study of an online game.

The second strand makes the case that gaming is socially embedded and needs to be contextualised to examine the culture of gaming, as well as to later explore the performative identities enacted by players. This effort begins by locating the thesis in a trend that looks beyond the moment of play and towards its location in the lives of gamers, such as how games are played, and the settings for play. The final three sections consider the following social aspects of 'race'/race, gender and sexuality. This thesis argues that these need to be analysed as intersectional aspects of identity, and that failing to do so has led to some of the more problematic conclusions in the research into online gaming. A brief section sets out why this study does not

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[8] Ludology is the study of games, which is also referred to as game studies. Ergodic is another adjective used in this literature.

consider class as an intersection of identity. However, there are problems with each of the others that deserve individual attention.

'Race' in the sociological sense, as a category that is socially constructed on the basis of genetic traits that have been grouped together through culturally and socially derived notions (Kolko et al., 2000), is often ignored in such research, as is game race. It is sometimes argued that race in games is purely cosmetic and part of a series of consumerist choices for the player (Nardi, 2010). Such research fails to adequately locate race in a social context, and attempts to create distance from stereotypical notions of 'race'. The thesis argues that race in games can be just as problematic as the concept of 'race'.

Gender is also handled unsatisfactorily in the literature. The issue of women's under-representation in gaming is frequently evoked in research on gaming more widely, for example. Online gaming research refers to the stereotype of men who play as female avatars (e.g. Huh and Williams, 2010), but with little critical consideration of the effect of this practice. After examining these two aspects of the research, the case is put forward for a more critical approach to gender in relation to both the avatar and the player, which is often taken as a signifier for the player's "true" or "authentic" identity. This issue is highly important for the thesis, especially considering the heteronormative environment in which gaming takes place, which was discussed in the first chapter.

The final part of this chapter considers how sexuality remains under-researched in this area. Certain researchers have claimed that sexual expression is not possible through an avatar in an online game (Bainbridge, 2010), while others have examined players' practices in this area (Valkyrie, 2011). By focusing on sexual expression,

other aspects of sexuality, such as the norms attached to it, are missed. This section argues instead that the heteronormative aspects of gaming as a culture have not been adequately researched, for example the problem of homophobia in gaming communities. Sexual norms still very much apply to such online spaces, and cannot be ignored.

2.1 Studying "Games as Games": Game Content and the Ergodic Approach

One of the earliest approaches to video games studies them as a media text (Aarseth, 2006). Borrowing from literary criticism and film studies, the emphasis in the ergodic, or ludological, approach is on particular elements of game design, such as the way in which narratives are expressed in video games. Juul (2005) outlined six core elements of a model to define and analyse games, for example.

> According to this model, a game is

1. a rule-based formal system;

2. with variable and quantifiable outcomes;

3. where different outcomes are assigned different values;

4. where the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome;

5. the player feels emotionally attached to the outcome;

6. and the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable. (Juul, 2005: 36)

This set of definitions enables analysis of game systems, such as the role of narrative, from a games studies perspective. Aarseth (2006) takes a similar approach in analysing core facets of play, especially in relation to video games. Above all,

Aarseth (2006) prioritises the experience of the researcher playing the game, rather than alternatives including watching YouTube videos of someone else playing, as the significance of different aspects of the game would not necessarily be apparent to a non-player.

However, Crawford (2012) problematises Juul's definitions and the ergodic approach more generally. Juul (2005) himself readily recognises that these definitions do not always work for all games, and Aarseth (2006) notes how the word "game" covers a wide variety of games. Simulation games, like the Sims, do not have an easily defined outcome for example (Crawford, 2012). In the Sims, the player can design a family group, with individuals who have goals for their life, though the player can override these. Generations of families can be created over a long period of play, with no end necessarily in sight - the process is pleasurable in itself. Crawford (2012) suggests that Juul's (2005) model is limited because many games cannot be categorised in this manner, and that the ergodic approach also ignores the fan content that accompanies the culture, which goes beyond the moment of play. This can include a wealth of material, such as blogs, fan sites, wiki pages, and YouTube videos, which also form part of the experience of gaming and deserve closer examination. In prioritising the experience of playing a game, and a close study of the game itself, such research also becomes limited to that conducted solely by gamers, which can be problematic, and is discussed in chapter four in relation to the issue of "insider" research. Additionally, the social context of gaming as a pastime and a critical approach to the different facets of a game cannot necessarily be understood using this framework. Crawford (2012) is correct to assert that other aspects of gaming deserve greater attention, though the ergodic approach does have its place in game studies. The next section moves towards examining the research

that considers the effects of gaming *on* players (mostly children), rather than the content of games.

2.2 Gaming as Problem: "Violent" Video Game Research

Some of the most popularised research into video games concerns the alleged effects of gaming on individuals. These studies are mostly psychological and related to research into media effects, such as the risk of violent films, or sexual content, especially towards children. These efforts can be traced back as early as the 1920s, when researchers from the Chicago School were asked to see if films were harmful, which they could not prove (Becker, 2002). Research into the effects of gaming has been contested in many ways. On the one hand, researchers such as Craig Anderson claim their findings demonstrate violent games are harmful, by making young people behave more aggressively (Bushman and Anderson, 2009). On the other hand, Thornham (2011) and Crawford (2012) hold that these studies, mostly set in experimental laboratories, do not necessarily match the social context in which games are played, since games are played mostly in the home, and only try to measure short-term effects on the individuals studied.

For example, Anderson et al. (2007) conducted three studies of school age children and teens to explore whether gaming is harmful. These studies include questionnaires to gauge social attitudes and measure school performance. Nevertheless, the surveys in all three studies focus narrowly on media consumption, without considering the social and domestic background of the children involved. In this way, the child's media consumption habits can be blamed, in the absence of other socially significant factors that should have been included in the surveys. This particular monograph also fails to define violent content in games, and misses

another way of adding social context to the debate. For example, violent content could include blood, severed limbs, or cartoon style violence in games, and can be interpreted in different ways.

Violent content is constructed differently depending on the cultural values of the country in question, since "violence" is a contested term that is open to cultural resignification. Kelly (2010) offers a fascinating study of how the rules of classification of violence in games differ in America and Japan. In America, ratings are given to games by the Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB), who closely monitor games for violent and sexual content, as well as gambling, alcohol and drug use. Any verbal mention of these can be censored, even a sentence such as "I bet I make it back alive" due to the tenuous gambling reference (Kelly, 2010: 145). Its Japanese equivalent, the Computer Entertainment Rating Organisation (CERO), is only concerned with the portrayal of violence in games. This includes the mistreatment of corpses, the killing of innocents and dismemberment, for example. These differences concern cultural perceptions of violence, which the media effects research does not consider, especially as Anderson et al.'s (2007) study does not even try to define violence. Ultimately, studies of video gaming need to take into account the socio-cultural context of players and that of the game design, otherwise important aspects of gaming culture will continue to be missed (Thornham, 2011; Crawford, 2012). The theme of gaming as a risk to children continues in content analyses of games, which also lack consideration of the socio-cultural context around gaming. They are often underpinned by the findings of the effects research and assume children *will* be harmed without establishing *how*.

2.3 Content Analyses of Gaming and Risk to Children

Researchers have examined elements of game content in similar ways to the effects research discussed above. Rather than searching for the potential effect of video games, they look for instances of violence that can be quantified, or the prevalence of stereotypical images in games. Dietz (1998) examined the most popular games at the time of her research (Spring 1995) by scoring them on their content. The categories included the presence of female characters, whether they were victims or heroes, and the presence of violence on a scale including no violence, socially acceptable violence (such as in sports) or violence directed at others. Her aim was to examine how games are problematic sources of socialisation for children. Yet, a number of games on the list were never designed to be played by children, such as the fighting game Mortal Kombat, renowned for its depiction of bloody violence. Moreover, Dietz (1998) assumes that such depictions must be a problem, without proving so, since she only actually quantifies the instances of each of these categories.

Another example is Beasley and Standley (2002), who sought to examine the representation of characters, including clothing and body shape. A list of the available games on Nintendo 64 and PlayStation was used to generate a random sample, then the first 20 minutes of each game was coded. They also found that women were under-represented, but just as many characters could not be easily gendered as they were animals or non-human. Their article included a section detailing their study's limitations, which mentioned the presence of characters on boxes or in opening videos that were not seen in the first 20 minutes of play. It seems thus questionable to focus on the first 20 minutes only, since this is often unrepresentative of the game, as it is normally a tutorial phase to introduce players to

the game. Once again, the authors assume that children *will* come into contact with these games and *be harmed* in the process, by quantifying the instances of these problematic features without proving a level of harm.

Much like the media effects research discussed above, these studies assume much about players, such as the emphasis on young people over adult players who are ignored by these studies. The fear of the influence of games on children is prioritised by all of these studies. Yet, the studies discussed here lack any research with children directly (or even young people), as they concentrate solely on the game's contents, and construct gamers as passive receivers of messages (Thornham, 2011). It has also been suggested that the warning labels on games create a "forbidden fruit" effect among children (Bijvank et al., 2009). Though these labels, such as the Pan European Game Information (PEGI) system, are aimed at advising parents and guardians about the suitability of the game for a particular age group, flagging violent or mature content on mocked-up video game artwork drew more of the children to these games than if they lacked them (ibid.). Having examined the key points of the ergodic and media effects research, the rest of the chapter demonstrates how the social situation of gaming culture is key to its understanding.

2.4 Critical Responses to the Effects Research: Moving Towards a Broader Conception of Video Gaming

In contrast to the previous section, the rest of the chapter considers research that seeks to locate gaming socially and sociologically. Initially, it is argued that the place of gaming in the domestic space is important to establish the normative beliefs and attitudes possessed by players, as well as the popular beliefs around gaming as a pastime. This section also demonstrates how gaming remains coded as a masculine

domain and the preserve of the lonely. Such stereotypical perspectives create an environment that limits the range of people who can claim to be gamers within a performative framework.

Walkerdine (2007) notes in her study of children and video games that children are framed as enjoying games differently according to gender. She believes that girls are excluded from game playing because of the regulation of femininity. Her study suggests two competing factors at work. Video recordings of girls playing showed their competitive side and enjoyment of games they were not "supposed" to like, but in interviews, they claimed to prefer games that involved helping others and co-operation. They thus put a slant on their play to manage their femininity in the interview, while continuing to play in different ways. Parents who were interviewed often stated that girls did not need to be regulated in their time spent playing as they were deemed less interested, whereas boys were framed as needing restrictions. In these parents' interviews, games were perceived as sites of masculinity production and a means for boys to channel violent behaviour appropriately, but only for a monitored amount of time. Walkerdine (2007) believes that girls were not being given the same chances to play because they would otherwise be deemed unfeminine.

Thornham (2011) also problematises the effects research and points towards a more fruitful direction. By only studying what games do *to* players, like the content analyses and media effects studies above, she argues that gamers become characterised as solitary, and the breadth of experiences related to gaming are missed in research. To this end, Thornham's (2011) argument is that:

> ... [G]aming needs to be reconceptualised, not in relation to what the game
> offers the gamers, but as a gendered, corporeal and embodied activity, framed
> by, and deeply contingent on, techno-social experiences. (Thornham, 2011:1)

Where the previously discussed studies possessed limitations is in their lack of attention to the context in which gaming takes place. This can include the player's domestic situation, the culture they have grown up with, and the ways in which they frame their experiences in speech. Qualitative, ethnographic work on online gaming has considered various areas of the experience (e.g. Taylor, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009; Nardi, 2010), such as different online games and their websites, and need to be evaluated.

At this point, research into particular aspects of identity in online games is examined including both the game and its social spaces, and reconciles these approaches. T L Taylor (2006) has been one of the main proponents of studying the ways in which players extend their play beyond the moment into other areas, such as forums, or other websites, to see the broader culture in which such gaming is situated. She refers to a "distributed social sphere", which extends the game outwards to other online spaces (Taylor, 2006: 51). Furthermore, this social sphere points to how an ethnography of an online game needs to consider social interaction between players in the game and away from it, which is revisited in chapter four. Such studies analyse aspects of the game, but within the social context of gaming, which this research also seeks to do. Taylor's (2012) more recent work concerning competitive gaming also charts how the offline social context of gaming culture can vary from country to country. South Korea has risen to be one of the most technologically connected countries in the world since 2000. High levels of government investment into the country's infrastructure have led to a widespread rollout of cheap but very

high speed broadband in the home. However, South Korean online gamers often still congregate in internet cafes known as "PC Bang" because the subscription rates are lower for many online games, and such cafés also have sophisticated PC equipment available for play. Massive investment into competitive gaming in South Korea has led to its top players becoming as famous as film stars, coupled with significant corporate sponsorship from PC brands and Coca Cola. Taylor (2012) holds that the social, political, or economic contexts around gaming, whether online or offline, are important for understanding online gaming. Moreover, certain stereotypes appear to be more of a Western construct, which are discussed in the following chapters, such as the lone male gamer stereotype, symbolised by teenage boys cooped up in their bedrooms in front of a computer. Gaming as a pastime, and video games themselves, need to be socially situated otherwise such features are missed by researchers. The next sections advance this contextualising process by examining more specific areas, starting with a brief note about class.

2.5 Class and Gaming

This study broadly follows an intersectional approach to how different intersections of identity interact (Crenshaw, 1991). This chapter and the analysis chapters partly examine how race/'race', gender and sexuality intersect in various ways, however the study does not have a particular emphasis on class, which this brief section explains. Class remains under-researched in studies of gaming. Crawford (2012) points to how middle class homes possess educational games for children, while working class families own more urban-themed (such as Grand Theft Auto), or military-oriented games. In the following, other possible routes of discussing class are set out.

Overall, it is more likely that online gamers are middle class (whether European or American) because of their internet access. The majority of my respondents had played online games for the best part of a decade. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has started to collect information regarding internet access as part of the Labour Force Survey in the last two years. Internet use in the UK remains less common in households with an income of less than £200 per week, with use almost universal in households with an income of over £500 per week (ONS, 2013). In America, household income also remains an important factor in internet access, with 76 per cent of households with incomes of less than $30,000 per year having internet access, increasing to 94 per cent in households with over $50,000 per year household income (Pew Internet, 2013).

The alternative is to take a capital-based approach drawing on the work of Bourdieu (1984) via the language used in interviews and on the forum. Bourdieu (1984) suggests that class can be discerned through a person's taste and cultural capital, which is reinforced in society where the higher classes impose their opinions of taste on the rest. This partially includes the use of language, which could mean that class could be inferred online from how one writes. However, doing so would be complicated, given the way in which people write online, with widespread use of acronyms, emoticons and specialised language (Boellstorff, 2008). Education and cultural capital can be hard to read before even taking language barriers into account. Boellstorff (2008) noted that English was the dominant language in Second Life, and non-native speakers would sometimes struggle in chat. Final Fantasy XIV is an international game, and non-native English speakers still used the English forum, partly to improve their English according to a number of threads.

This game also uses the word class to refer to the role undertaken by the avatar, as outlined in the introductory chapter. In all Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs), the player must select a class, which in World of Warcraft and others is referred to as a job, and this shapes their approach to the game. Within these roles, players can be soldiers, mages, or a host of other options depending on the game. In the majority of MMORPGs, the player has to select one for the avatar during the avatar creation process, and that avatar can only pursue one path. In Final Fantasy XIV, the player must select an initial class from the list included in the introductory chapter, but can then branch out into any class they wish by buying the right equipment for the class, such as a staff for a magic role. Overall, while I acknowledge social class is certainly important, an analysis of social class lies outside the remit of this thesis. Given the overlap in terminology, the difficulty of defining social class, especially considering the lack of information, and the language problem, it seemed that social class would be too difficult and risky to include here. The following sections outline the existing literature in relation to the other intersections of identity examined in the study, beginning with race/'race'.

2.6 Race/'Race' in Online Games

Research into the relationship between game race, and offline 'race' in the sociological sense (as socially constructed) remains under-developed. This section explores the two main approaches to race/'race' in the gaming literature. Firstly, certain research suggests that race in games is simply cosmetic and superficial (e.g. Nardi, 2010). These writers characterise game race as a personal, consumer choice, with no consideration of the potential wider meanings in which the decision is made. Secondly, others have argued instead that race is as problematic as 'race', and needs to be analysed in a much broader social context (Higgin, 2009; Galloway, 2012).

Galloway (2012) debates whether race ought to be used as a term in gaming, or whether the term has stuck to a particular set of software artefacts. In some respects, 'species' could be an equally accurate term, for example. Avatars are always humanoid, yet can be divided into different types. Fantasy-style MMORPGs like Final Fantasy XIV often borrow species types from Tolkien such as Elves, Dwarves, Humans, Orcs, Trolls and similar (Higgin, 2009). Shorter races include Gnomes or Goblins, or more bestial forms akin to mythological beings such as Minotaur (ibid.). Nardi (2010) states that races are purely cosmetic, and only the "beauty" or "ugliness" of a given race is important to consider. She thus characterises the selection of race as a matter of personal aesthetic choice, with little consequence. In her fieldwork, she chose a female Night Elf partly because they are purple and their city is also shades of purple. In his chapter on identity, Bainbridge (2010) concludes:

> The fact that one of my characters, Adalgisa, is a female Tauren[9], does not seem to define my identity at all. Experiencing WoW [World of Warcraft] as Adalgisa does not make me feel female or bovine. In short, in case you were wondering - I am not a cow. (Bainbridge, 2010: 182)

Prior to this, he had discussed some banter in the guild he was part of, where other players dismissed Tauren as "cows" and kept making jokes about steak in a derogatory fashion. Bainbridge denies attributing any meaning to his avatar choice, which was one of 22 used in his fieldwork. It may be more the case that he did not have the same close relationship with this avatar compared to others. These claims of race as cosmetic suggest more superficial concerns within the community, yet race could be viewed as comprised of stereotypes that are reproduced by players, resulting in Tauren avatars being pushed towards behaving like cows because of

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[9] The Tauren race are large, Minotaur style beings.

their appearance. This suggests that game race has more in common with 'race' than some have argued.

Nakamura (2002) has put forward the notion of "cybertypes" online (p.43). Writing more widely about the internet, to include chatrooms and other text-based online spaces, she notes the problem of "default whiteness" in online interaction - unless the user represents their 'race' through a username, everyone is assumed to be white (Nakamura, 2002: 33). In the MUDs[10] she studied, users had a text box to describe themselves, rather than an embodied avatar, however some of her observations have been used in relation to online games too. Where users wished to represent themselves as Japanese men or women, Nakamura (2002) found particular stereotypes were often evoked, such as the geisha or samurai. In particular, some men sought to represent themselves as Asian women, with a description emphasising a submissive nature but an exotic sexuality, for example. This behaviour has a double impact. Firstly, such "identity tourism" allows an individual to evoke an Asian identity, without the risk associated with being non-white offline (Nakamura, 2002: 39). Secondly, references to 'race' in self-description can only be linked to stereotypes, rather than other descriptions of 'race', thus limiting the potential identity choices, even in a space where self-description is not linked to an avatar.

Higgin (2009) picks up this thread and takes a critical stance towards MMORPGs. Emphasising that online games are not separate to everyday life, Higgin (2009) points out the relationship between fantasy MMORPGs made by Western game design studios, such as World of Warcraft and EverQuest, and Euro-American fantasy traditions. With online games, research needs to examine the cultural context

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[10] Multi-User Domains (MUDs) were a popular form of chatroom in the 1990s. Most were themed and could have a number of separate rooms for different purposes, such as a public area, which could resemble a pub, as well as private spaces for regular users.

underpinning the software design, as well as how players interpret it (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009). These games are steeped in the worlds created by Tolkien and Lewis, in which (good) Humans are usually white, and Dwarves, with their short stature, large noses and greedy attitude, evoke stereotypes of Jews (Higgin, 2009). Taylor's (2006) study of the game EverQuest noted that the Erudite race was an attempt to create a black 'Human' race, which the designers claimed were endowed with greater intelligence[11] to move away from offline stereotypes of black people as less intelligent than other 'races'. During her study, Taylor (2006) found that Erudites were uncommon, and despite attempts by EverQuest's designers to distance themselves from stereotyping the game's races, she maintains that the Erudites inevitably remain linked to certain ideologies. This can also be perceived through the use of symbolism by designers in other games to denote 'race' in avatar race.

The Troll race in World of Warcraft has been especially criticised since they are the only race who speak with a Jamaican accent, and also have tusks through their noses, which both Higgin (2009) and Galloway (2012) identify as the only attempt at a black avatar in World of Warcraft. This diminishes the possibilities available to non-white players if they want an avatar that reflects their ethnicity, but also situates the Troll race in particular ways. Orcs in Lord of the Rings, and other evil figures are characterised as black (Higgin, 2009). Where these figures are referenced in online games, such as the Troll, cybertypes are perpetuated. In comparison to the other World of Warcraft races, the Troll is thus very racialised. Galloway (2012) holds that, especially with regard to Trolls:

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[11] In the gaming sense, intelligence is one of many statistics that avatars have, including strength and defence, to denote how a race is predisposed to different roles. In many MMORPGs, different races have varying starting statistics that can benefit the player who is looking to create a particular type of avatar, however Final Fantasy XIV did not operate such a system. High intelligence is normally associated with mage or wizard specialised avatars.

Gamic races are often essentialist in nature, paralleling certain offline retrograde notions of naturally or physiologically determined and unchangeable human races. (Galloway, 2012: 117)

Ritsema and Thakore (2012) also agree with this perspective, noting how racial allegories in World of Warcraft are discussed on forums, but are often ignored in academic work. Where Bainbridge (2010) ignores the repercussions of the Tauren's racial coding in the quotation above, Ritsema and Thakore (2012) note how the Tauren live on the plains and are imbued with Native American symbols. This exemplifies the differences between the two approaches to race/'race'.

Shapiro (2010) suggests another issue, with regard to 'race' in online worlds such as Second Life. In Second Life, avatars can be flexible – the user can be an animal, alien, human, or something in-between. Shapiro (2010) noticed that the majority of avatars in Second Life were Caucasian and very few were non-white, much like the absence of Erudites in EverQuest (Taylor, 2006). Boellstorff (2008) also notes that non-white avatars were less common during his Second Life fieldwork, and that residents who had used them in the past ceased doing so because of racist remarks. Thus in Western online spaces, the main compulsion seems to be towards "whitening" regardless of the possibilities afforded by the design. In effect, it would not necessarily matter if World of Warcraft *had* minority ethnic racial possibilities as players would probably still prefer Caucasian avatars. This suggests that online spaces, including online games, reproduce white domination and racial logics.

These critical debates are clearly useful, in terms of charting how the offline and online mingle, and how particular markers of 'race' become part of online race, thus locating the game in a social context of implicit racism. Yet, Ritsema and Thakore

(2012) also mention that World of Warcraft echoes Hollywood in characterising the heroic, "good" races as white, which illustrates a problem here. Much of the criticism here could equally be applied in some form to films or television (e.g. Harris, 2006). Nakamura's (2002) cybertypes also emphasised the role of the user in self-determining 'race' and then performing it in online spaces. These visions of race/'race' render it static and unchanging, and ignore the ways in which players perform their identity in such spaces. Though Bainbridge's (2010) account is patchy, the references to Tauren as cows still reflect part of the norms that players apply to this race, and in turn affect how they are performed, in addition to the culture created by the game designers too. This also follows Pearce and Artemesia's (2009) call to examine both the socio-cultural context of software and game design, as well as the user's interpretation of the values inherent in an online game or world. By solely concentrating on the link to offline 'race' (which is of course important), the authors miss the meanings attributed by players, which may offer contested variations.

Sundén (2009) looked at female Trolls from a queer perspective, and placed importance on how they offer a more 'butch' appearance than the other female races in World of Warcraft, for example. In effect, certain self-defined queer women had female Troll avatars since they were less likely to attract sexual harassment from self-defined heterosexual male players. This suggests that different aspects of the avatar cannot be easily disentangled, and can be analysed in multiple ways. The notion of the performativity of 'race', which uses Judith Butler's (1990; 1993) work in relation to 'race' rather than gender, is examined more closely in the next chapter. For now, it is worth noting that game race remains a signifier of identity, but also located on the avatar's digital body. Like offline 'race', each race is associated with certain norms, which the player is expected to perform within. The next section

considers how gender has been researched in this area, yet like race/'race', remains under-developed.

2.7 Gender and Online Gaming

This section examines how gender has been treated in the literature relating to online games to further the process of socially situating gaming culture. I argue that gender has been primarily constructed in two ways in much of the existing research. Firstly, the focus for some is on the gender of the player, often reducing questions of gender to why women are less likely to play (e.g. Bertozzi, 2008; Jenkins and Cassell, 2008). Masculinity in gaming and gamers seems to have been neglected in comparison, with only Walkerdine (2007) and Thornham (2011) considering both masculinity and femininity. Secondly, where the avatar's gender is discussed, the stereotype of heterosexual, self-defined men playing as a female avatar has become all too easily evoked, without being adequately problematised (e.g. Huh and Williams, 2010). Continuing with a more critical theme, and seeking to set out a more contextualised approach, the discussion initially covers research, which has concentrated on women as (non) gamers, then the gender of avatars.

Much like the studies mentioned above, there are elements of online gaming research, which focus solely on the experience of women players. The exclusion and harassment of women in online gaming has been well-documented in recent years, such as www.notinthekitchenanymore.com, which contains recordings of a female gamer being verbally abused by male players in a First Person Shooter online game to expose misogynistic behaviour towards female gamers. Researchers have also sought to find possible solutions for girls' and young women's exclusion from gaming more widely. For some, the answer seemed to be "pink" games, designed to

appeal to girls and young women (Kafai et al., 2008), as the gaming industry is perceived to be more focused on the male gamer market, and tends to rely on stereotypical representations of women that are consistently off-putting. Yet, researchers including Helen W. Kennedy (2006), T L Taylor (2006) and Helen Thornham (2011) have all pointed to the problem of these games perpetuating stereotypically gendered notions of women's leisure and activities. Royse et al. (2007) go as far as saying that studies of the images of women in games assume that women *must* have a problem with such images. By corralling girls and young women into particular games that rely on stereotypical female activities, such as cooking, or looking after others, they are excluded from other types of games, which they may find enjoyable. Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) hold that the market divides boys and girls, but this does not mean these alleged gender preferences have any essential basis. Consequently, the notion of "pink" games is highly questionable, as they falsely divide the market, and reinforce gender norms. Taylor (2006) crucially makes the point that research into girls and gaming is often extrapolated to include adult women, without extra data, which is highly problematic and assumes women's and girls' interests remain static over the life course.

With regard to online gaming, gender is often considered in relation to female gamers. Socialising in MMORPGs is often emphasised as attractive to women, and female players are seen as occupying stereotypical roles in fights, such as healers (Corneliussen, 2008). Taylor (2006) devotes a chapter of her book to the female players of EverQuest, who make up around 20 per cent of the EverQuest population and she believes play despite the way the game has been designed. She documents the different sources of enjoyment for female players to move away from such an analysis. The female players interviewed seem uneasy about the appearance of the

female avatars offered by the game, and sometimes deliberately opted to use shorter races, which were less curvaceous. Women are still viewed as intruders in particular types of games, which Taylor (2006) links to the exclusion of women from technology and sports more widely. This is also compounded by the way in which women talk about their gaming, such as enjoying particular types of gaming, while claiming other women do not share their passion. Yet, she does not consider male players in the same way, which leaves a gap in her analysis, such as why men enjoy these games.

Nardi (2010) has some interesting insights regarding the problems facing women who play online games. In discursive terms, she refers to online games as a "boy's tree house" (Nardi, 2010: 152), a third space, much like a bar, in which public and private are more muddled. As a result, the prevalent discourse in an online game can have a different tone compared to other online spaces, where there are fewer men. Nardi (2010) points to the male space operating with sexualised, homophobic language, yet she believes that this has a dual effect: "…males maintained control through the use of aggressive language, but the tree house allowed females more latitude in speech and action than everyday life typically does – latitude they often leveraged and enjoyed," (Nardi, 2010: 153). She found herself consequently being tested by a self-defined male player to see how she would react to macho posturing banter, though she decided to go along with it, and believed that the group she was playing with accepted her because she did not become upset. In effect, Nardi (2010) did not challenge the way in which this player spoke to her, and became complicit in perpetuating a macho discourse within the group.

In Sundén and Sveningsson's (2012) twin ethnography of the straight and queer aspects of World of Warcraft, Sveningsson's straight ethnography is also concerned

with this issue too. Sveningsson found the experience of playing in a masculine-dominated space difficult at times. The objectification of women by self-defined heterosexual male players was hard for her to hear initially, but she also describes becoming accustomed to it over time, coming to see it as more of a nuisance. At one point, she found herself reproducing the discourse in her own speech, becoming "one of the boys" in the process, much like Nardi (2010). She then joined an all-female guild, where crude language was forbidden, and realised that her previous acceptance of macho discourse was misguided. In straight guilds, women are positioned in particular roles in the game, that of socialisers, or even "guild moms", who maintain the social order in the guild (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012). Female avatars perceived to be women are also more readily offered help or gifts, yet it is expected that they will not disrupt the dominant masculine discourse (ibid.). Sveningsson holds that women will try to escape into all-female guilds, however this seems problematic as it would maintain the male dominance of such spaces (ibid.).

Focusing on avatar gender, Nardi's (2010) work represents some of the more problematic research on gender. She discusses gender switching, but in more heteronormative terms. Her avatar was a female Night Elf, often used by self-defined male players, and she was surprised when other players referred to her using male pronouns. For her, the appeal of the Night Elves was partly that their city was purple, which she held ought to attract women, as well as the layout of cities, with their shops and similarly "female-oriented" design features. She also mentions the male Blood Elves, a distant relative of the Night Elves, summing them up as "not the manly studs of fairy tales but amusingly effeminate boy-guys, animated by feminine gestures," (Nardi, 2010: 169). Yet, elsewhere the unpopularity of the male Blood Elves has been well documented, as well as the outcry over the initial design, which

players believed was too feminine, so the designers had to make them look more masculine, though they still face homophobic comments (Corneliussen, 2008). Moreover, the bigoted comments made by Blood Elves in the narrative and the red drapes adorning their home city has led to an association with Blood Elves being Germanic, and popular with neo-Nazi players (Monson, 2012). These races have contested meanings applied to them based on different aspects of identity, whether it is gender and/or race. As Nardi (2010) focuses predominantly on the aesthetic aspect of the game, she misses the socio-cultural context in which the game is embedded.

Quantitative work on the issue of gender is equally heteronormative. Huh and Williams (2010) discuss a survey they conducted in the online game EverQuest II. The authors hypothesised that women would want to alter their identity more readily due to existing power relations, but that men's decisions regarding gender would be affected by their sexuality. Heterosexual men would maintain their existing gender to avoid "hassle", but homosexual men would be more interested in switching gender, which they refer to as "gender swapping" (Huh and Williams, 2010: 166). They found that men were likelier to switch than women, homosexual men more so, however their survey data lacks any kind of explanation for these tendencies. They do however put forward the idea that players viewed their avatars instrumentally as part of a consumer choice, much like Nardi (2010). Other surveys, such as Hussain and Griffiths (2008), have also found that men are more likely to switch gender than women. The focus on appearance seems to trivialise the choices that players make when creating an avatar. Appearance is important to players, with emphasis placed on different types of equipment, as well as the above discussion of various races and their appearances, which can influence the decisions of players. Moreover, the decision to switch genders equally becomes exoticised. The other problem is that the

sexuality dimension remains unexplored, despite the references to heterosexual men being the primary subject of the stereotype around avatar gender.

A more critical approach is being developed, which is very relevant for this study. Valkyrie (2012) highlights the need for honesty in online gaming in relation to gender with an emphasis on women needing to prove that they are "real" women, as they are seen as an exotic exception and need to prove they have a female body through either pictorial "evidence" or through speaking on voice chat. As a result, Valkyrie (2012) concludes that players press for transparency about offline sex, which in turn promotes the reinforcement of binaristic gender norms. He suggests that such games are imbued with these ideas, in terms of authenticity and transparent gender. The reinforcement of gender stereotypes means that self-defined women are encouraged to be submissive to reap the benefits, since those perceived to be women are often given more help and gifts, but in return, they may also face sexual harassment. Valkyrie (2012) also notes that the problem of sexual harassment has become so acute that some self-defined men avoid playing as female avatars, since the association between female avatars and women is so close. As a result, the possibilities for experimenting with gender can be limited in such games. The demand for authentic identities also appears to go hand-in-hand with a rejection of identity experimentation and roleplay more broadly. In the next chapter, the relationship between authentic identities and heteronormativity is examined more closely, but it is important to note the following here. Van Zoonen (2013) puts forward how cultural and political trends have pushed the notion of a single identity in a single body. One example is of the biometric passport, which fixes identity on to a few visible traits. Online, this manifests in the emphasis on a single user with a

single profile, but with games, the authentic identity is tested through gender policing.

This section has examined how gender has been treated unevenly within the literature on gaming, such as an emphasis on exotic instances of gender switching, or through a singular focus on female players. In contrast, I argue that avatar gender needs to be problematised through an examination of how gender is signified by players through the avatar, and the norms attached to gender online through the game's forum. The performance of gender is also related to authenticity, which means both a player's and avatar's gender are under scrutiny to gauge whether the player is "honest". This issue needs to be unpacked, especially in relation to the notion of heteronormativity. The following section moves on to the related topic of sexuality and online gaming.

2.8 Sexuality and Online Gaming

In the above section on media effects, it was noted how violent and sexual content in gaming are viewed as risky to children. Beasley and Standley (2002) were especially concerned by the representations of women in console video games with large breasts and bottoms, who represent the potential for the objectification of women. Moreover, Taylor (2006) noted the disquiet of female gamers in EverQuest who disliked the appearance of female avatars. Nevertheless, sexuality remains under-researched in regard to online gaming (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012), especially around sexual norms. This study's emphasis on heteronormativity and how it constrains online identity and embodiment also means that attitudes towards sexuality, especially homosexuality, must be examined in gaming culture.

Returning to the work of Bainbridge (2010), a segment in his chapter on identity details two in-game weddings he attended, since the players who were getting married were using avatars whose online gender did not match their offline sex. He explains in a short paragraph that this troubles the notion of identity because their sex and gender are incongruent, but he offers no further reflection. Oddly, he also claims he never witnessed much 'sexual' behaviour or people finding partners in the game, despite the fact that the previous paragraph described an incident where he saw three other avatars dancing in their underwear on tables, and decided that he would do the same with the female avatar he was using at the time. All apparently also received money from bystanders. Bainbridge (2010) believes that sexual expression is not possible through an avatar, in spite of this account of what sounds akin to a form of lapdancing, however Valkyrie (2011) has clearly charted how World of Warcraft players are willing and able to engage in cybersex in the same game.

Valkyrie's (2011) study remains one of the only accounts of sexual behaviour in online gaming. In the course of interviews, players described how they used emotes, which are programmed actions to resemble emotional responses, such as laughing and smiling, to make the avatar appear to engage in sexual behaviour, when closely positioned to another avatar. Consequently, one combination involved two avatars standing close to each other and one using a "cry" emote to make the avatar bend over, which gave the appearance of oral sex. Interestingly, players who had participated in cybersex held conflicting views. Firstly, such cybersex was considered a mere substitute for offline sex. Secondly, cybersex, though deemed inferior, was still perceived as a form of infidelity. Moreover, cybersex in online games is still judged according to the gendered values attached to offline sexual

behaviour, and was still deemed risky, especially for women. This suggests that the sexual double standard is further perpetuated online, even though cybersex does not pose the types of risk associated with offline sex such as pregnancy or STIs. The fears around cybersex and the reactions of other players often meant players would try to find out of the way, quiet areas to avoid others (Valkyrie, 2011).

Boellstorff (2008) provides some insights into the presence of sexual subcultures in Second Life. He noted the popularity of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) groups, as well as the presence of the "furry" community, who dress up as animals (though it is not always sexual), and various bondage and sado-masochistic areas. However, all of these groups were occasionally harassed, and sado-masochistic groups were particularly viewed as controversial. Boellstorff (2008) notes incidents where a dominant avatar would lead a submissive partner around on a leash in a public area, which could make others feel uncomfortable, and led to fears around teenagers being exposed to them. He believed that for the most part, Second Life residents were generally tolerant however. It is also possible for Second Life avatars to use scripted actions to enable the avatar to appear to have sex (with stick-on genitals), or visit lapdancing clubs. Brookey and Cannon (2009) expressed concern however that new residents were being exploited into working in the clubs to earn money for themselves. Sexuality in online worlds and games remains subject to norms from offline life. It is still coded as risky or even threatening in such contexts, but remains under-researched.

Nevertheless, in the above section on gender, the stereotype of self-defined men using a female avatar was highlighted. The self-defined male player in question seeks to secure their heterosexuality, with an emphasis placed on preferring the attractiveness of the female avatar. It is argued in the following chapter that this

stereotype needs to be analysed in terms of heteronormativity as outlined in the work of Butler (1990). Researchers such as Bainbridge (2010) have been too focused on the possibility of sexual practices in online games, while missing the effect of sexual norms on the possibilities afforded to players in terms of identity performance. Thornham (2011) holds that heterosexual male gamers must continually reassert their behaviour as normative in the face of accusations of homosexuality, through the lone male gamer stereotype, which couches the lonely young man playing games as perversely focusing on gaming to the exclusion of everything else. Self-defined male players of online games must undertake the same performative actions to prevent similar accusations. This is discussed in more detail in relation to the notions of heteronormativity and authenticity in the next chapter.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has examined how gaming and its culture need to be understood as socially situated. The ergodic literature concentrates so much on the moment of play that the rest of gaming culture is missed. The problems within the effects research arise when gaming and games are divorced from the social contexts in which they take place, such as the studies that neglects the social background of participants. The emphasis on children in this research also ignores the many adults who enjoy games. Such research tends to be extrapolated to include adult gamers. It is argued that this framing limits the performative possibilities around gaming, by constraining who can claim to be a gamer depending on the situation.

The three aspects of the social context of online gaming – gender, sexuality and 'race'/race – inform the rest of the thesis. In the course of this review chapter, much of the literature tends to consider these three separately. This thesis argues that they

need to be treated as inter-related, and doing otherwise would detract from the whole. The case of Final Fantasy XIV particularly demonstrates how game race and gender coincide, as certain races are only available in one gender, or the way in which choice of avatar gender can be characterised in sexual ways. This chapter has shown that notable gaps in the literature exist, upon which this thesis seeks to build. Research on gender and gaming has focused overly on the gender of players and how this affects participation in gaming, such as the regulation of femininity. Game race research is still relatively small, and concerns the "hard-coding" of racial stereotypes into games. Sexuality has also been neglected in many ways, with an emphasis that sexual expression is not possible in an online, and sexual norms are mostly ignored. As a result, the following chapters seek to rectify these absences by examining the relationship between players and avatars. For example, the stereotypes around avatar gender need to be unpacked further as they are often referred to uncritically, but can be viewed as part of the perpetuation of heteronormativity.

This chapter has laid the foundations for examining the social context of games and gaming culture. The insights from this chapter underpin the next chapter, which charts the theoretical ideas that inform this study. By examining the performative approach to identity, the way in which the individual enacts identity using utterances within the heterosexual matrix will be discussed in relation to embodiment. The avatar, and its race and gender, are considered as a body project. For both of these theoretical ideas, the social context is important. With performative identity, the normative environment shapes the possibilities available to the individual. With the body project, the individual uses the body to signify aspects of identity to others, the meaning of which is only intelligible within a particular context. It also considers

how online identity has been examined elsewhere, and argues that a more theoretically informed approach is necessary.

Chapter 3 Online Identity and Embodiment: situating the avatar in sociological theory

The aim of this chapter is to further situate the study within a theoretical context, which enables the analysis of performative identity and embodiment in later chapters. In the last chapter, the argument was put forward that online spaces must be socially situated as part of a particular culture around gaming, as well as that of the players. It thus concentrated on existing video game research, then considered the relationships between online gaming and gender, sexuality and 'race'/race.

Much research into online gaming makes the claim that the avatar conveys identity with less focus on how this is undertaken. This chapter redresses the imbalance through a sustained examination of performative identity and embodiment in relation to the avatar. The first part is concerned with the work of Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 2004), and explores her work on performative identity and heteronormativity. A performative identity is enacted on a moment-by-moment basis through a series of utterances and stylisations, such as speech, or the actions of the individual. However, this performance is constrained by the norms of intelligibility in this particular context, which render certain performances impossible. Her main example is heteronormativity, which relates to how gender is constrained by the limitations set out by the heterosexual ideal that results in the congruence of biological sex and gender. She also uses Althusser's (1971) notion of interpellation, which evokes how society "hails" an individual to assume a particular subject position through ideology, and in time the individual believes that this is their "natural" position. For example, heteronormativity hails the individual to maintain a particular gender identity based on the heterosexual ideal.

In the course of the last chapter, the notion of authenticity was touched on, and is revisited in this chapter as a conceptual tool that is intertwined with heteronormativity as part of the policing of gender and identity. Authenticity is considered in the work of van Zoonen (2013), who suggests that cultural and political forces promote a discourse concerning how one body holds a single quantifiable identity, such as with biometric passports. On the internet, this translates into a single user with a single profile, such as a single Facebook account, however this notion could be complicated by the use of avatars - a digital body in effect. This chapter considers how the two concepts of heteronormativity and authenticity appear to mesh in online gaming, with gender becoming a quantifiable measure of identity that is a proxy measurement for the authentic ("real") person displaying their "true" self online, or deceiving others with an alternately gendered avatar. These notions are important conceptual tools for the study, which holds that online identity is performative, and online spaces are heteronormative.

The next sections consider how online identity has been conceptualised in the existing literature, and argue that a more theoretically driven approach is needed. Such an approach can add nuance to the discussion around online identity, as well as bringing more of a sociological slant to the debate. It has been claimed, for example, that the allegedly anonymous and disembodied nature of the internet permits a multiple approach to identities (Turkle, 1995). Such research holds that the internet provides opportunities "to be someone else" and behave in a different way compared to "real" life. Increasingly, studies of the internet seek to problematise this notion (e.g. O'Brien, 2001; Shapiro, 2010; Ess and Consalvo, 2011). This view is summed up in the following quotation from Nancy Baym (2009):

Even behaviours that only appear online are put there by embodied people acting in geographic locations embedded in face-to-face social relationships and multimedia environments that shape the meaning and consequences of those online practices. (p.721).

Rather than reifying the internet as a space that is separate to social life, I argue that it is more valuable to explore the ways in which offline and online intermingle, and this confluence affects the type of identities that are possible. This is due to two factors. On the one hand, the identity possibilities that are open to the internet user are constrained by wider social contexts, such as the culture in which the individual grew up, and heteronormativity. On the other hand, gaming culture itself equally affects the performative possibilities. This relates to the culture around gaming as a hobby, including norms, values, memes, and a shared knowledge around different games and the history of gaming.

The next part of the chapter examines embodiment, and how theories of the body can be related to the avatar. Taylor (2002) has pointed to how an avatar both locates the player in the game space, and acts as a representative of the player for social interaction. Moreover, the surface of the avatar resembles what Shilling (2012) refers to as a body project, which concerns how identity can be signified on the surface of the body in late modernity, which is related to the growth of consumer culture in this period. Shilling's (2012) work on this notion is examined in greater detail throughout this section. I argue that the avatar is often treated in a similar way, by signifying aspects of the player's identity, following a careful process of avatar creation. Decisions are weighed up by the player throughout the game too, where the avatar's appearance exhibits the player's knowledge and skill, which, for some, form part of their identity as a gamer, for example. This decision-making process was discussed

extensively in interviews and on the forum, and is returned to in the analysis chapters.

Beneath the surface, the relationship between the player and avatar becomes more complex. Rather than viewing the internet as a disembodied experience involving a Cartesian split, I posit that the player's body mediates the experience of play through incorporating practices such as typing, as well as transferring social norms that structure social interaction, for example the distance maintained from others in conversation. The player's body and embodied experiences are important for understanding their relationship with the avatar, as well as how players use the avatar to enact identity. This part of the chapter uses works by both Grosz (1994; 2001) and Hayles (1999) to develop these ideas. Grosz (1994) explores the ways in which the body and mind have been conceptualised, arguing for a much more intertwined approach, using the metaphor of the Möbius strip. In her later work, Grosz (2001) problematises the disembodied aspect of much research concerning the internet and virtual worlds, which emphasise a "masculine" attitude towards the body, and exaggerate the possibilities for leaving the body behind. Hayles' (1999) account also highlights the embodied relationship with technology, by criticising much information research for forgetting the body at the keyboard. Instead, technology users apply "embodied knowledge" to their experience of technology to engage with it (Hayles, 1999: p.202). These ideas are important for examining how the body of the avatar is used in the performance of identity by the player who constantly draws on embodied experience within the game. Moreover, this discussion clarifies the relationship between identity and embodiment further. This begins with a discussion of Judith Butler's work.

3.1 Performative Identity and the Body in the Work of Judith Butler

Butler (1990) provides a number of insights into performative identity. Her premise is that the notion of a core, essential identity ought to be questioned. Concerned by the foundationalist approach of second wave feminism, in which "woman" is characterised as a universal category, she adopts an intersectional approach that examines how identity is comprised of a number of identifications – no-one is just "woman". Other intersections of identity such as 'race', sexuality and class also play a part in women's daily lives that create a diversity of experience for different women (Crenshaw, 1991). Butler (1990) also questions the essentialist perspective on identity, which suggests identity is a core, constant property of the self, and instead puts forward the notion that identity is never complete, but always in process. Borrowing from de Beauvoir's declaration that one is not born a woman, but becomes one, Butler posits how identity, with particular reference to gendered identity, is performative. If identity is enacted through a process, then certain types of actions and stylisations create the performative identity. Repetition of these acts cements the *appearance* of a stable identity, but this is ultimately part of the process of performance.

> My argument is that there need not be 'doer behind the deed,' but that the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed. (Butler, 1990: 195)

This uses the linguist Austin's concept of the performative, who noted how utterances can become more or less important depending on the setting. If a judge in a courtroom says "I sentence you to…", this statement becomes a legally binding declaration that creates a specific situation, such as imprisonment (ibid.). I argue that the players enact performative identity through the avatar via embodied means, such

as its appearance, as well as when talking with others as the avatar and on forums. The process behind creating an avatar is a performative act because the avatar is the social representative of the player and signifies identity (Taylor, 2002). Once the avatar is complete, players use different means of communication to enact identity on a continual basis. In chapter five, the empirical findings discuss how the players talk as the *avatar* or as *themselves* while playing the game, which in turn enacts a performative identity based on the avatar's attributes.

Butler (1990) then uses the notion of performativity to examine how biological sex is socially constructed in the same way as gender. Unlike second wave feminism's definition of sex as natural, and gender as a social construction that follows, Butler (1990) holds that sex is equally constructed. Citing biological arguments over the definition of sex, Butler (1990) notes that gender ambiguous individuals continue to defy the biomedical definition of sex. She uses the notion of socially constructed sex as a springboard to open up her discussion of gender.

> If sex does not limit gender, then perhaps there are genders, ways of culturally interpreting the sexed body, that are in no way restricted by the apparent duality of sex. (Butler, 1990: 152)

If this is recognised, then it also becomes possible to challenge what Butler refers to as heteronormativity. Performative identity is restricted in a number of ways, not least through the heterosexual ideal. In everyday interaction, heterosexuality is perceived as the norm, which in turn structures gendered identities. Thus, women are supposed to be feminine, and men masculine. Other gendered performances are deemed abject and unintelligible because they do not cohere to the heteronormative ideal, or the "heterosexual matrix" (Butler, 1990: 7). In her later work, Butler (1993)

notes how heteronormativity is thus a form of interpellation, specifically relating to gender and sexuality. However, if gender need not follow sex, and if sex is performatively constructed, then she believes there is space for change. Heteronormativity can be challenged through the performance of alternate genders, such as female masculinity, which push the boundaries of intelligibility.

In the introduction to this chapter, I noted how heteronormativity can make itself felt differently online through the notion of authentic identity (van Zoonen, 2013). The following sections clarify this relationship further, but for now it is worth reiterating how Butler's (1990) notion of heteronormativity is related to authentic identity. Van Zoonen (2013) holds that authentic identity has become increasingly important, especially online, where the assumption prevails that a single identity resides in a single body, such as the singular internet user on a particular website. With online games, players demand to know if the sex of the player matches the avatar gender. The avatar is tested, in the sense that the avatar's gender must match the biological sex of the player, otherwise the player is deemed to be deceptive. This view of gender and authentic identity is extensively examined in chapter six in the findings.

This study also seeks to understand the role of the avatar as a form of embodiment, and Butler has considered the body to an extent. In the follow-up to *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler's *Bodies That Matter* (1993) responds to her critics, who suggested that performativity seemed too free-floating, as if it were possible to change identity by selecting different clothes each morning. Butler (1993) reaffirms that social constraints demand continuity of identity, even if this is illusory, and introduces the body into her theorising, which appeared to be treated fleetingly in the first book. Continuing with the themes of intelligibility and performativity, she aims to see which bodies are deemed abject (and do not "matter").

How then can one think through the matter of bodies as a kind of materialisation governed by regulatory norms in order to ascertain the workings of heterosexual hegemony in the formation of what qualifies as a viable body? How does that materialisation of the norm in bodily formation produce a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which, in failing to qualify as the fully human, fortifies those regulatory norms? (Butler, 1993: 16).

Taking a Foucauldian approach to the body, Butler (1993) seeks to demonstrate how the possibilities for bodies are constrained by social norms, which also limit performative identity. Foucault (1977) argued that social institutions and norms push the individual to discipline the body in particular ways to fit into social life. In Butler's (1993) interpretation, if certain identifications are more acceptable, such as those stemming from the heterosexual ideal, then bodies are socially acceptable if they are presented within the same norms.

Butler's (2004) more recent work on intersex and transsexuals probably exemplifies her clearest stance on the body. One of the questions that she has always been concerned with is "who counts as a human?" Anyone who fails to fit the "dominant frame for the human" becomes dehumanised and potentially subject to symbolic (through language for example) or actual violence (Butler, 2004: 25). Once again referring back to the work of Foucault (1977), Butler reiterates the importance of the social construction of gender in particular contexts and in different time periods.

Terms such as 'masculine' and 'feminine' are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending

on geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose (Butler, 2004: 9).

Consequently, the frame for understanding who counts as "human" is open to change over time and in different social spaces. With regard to intersex, Butler (2004) notes the traumatic treatment involved in "correcting" the gender ambiguity present in intersex infants to maintain gender along a particular binary. As far as transsexuals are concerned, Butler (2004) problematises how they must seek treatment through the diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder (GID), which encourages the individual to pursue a specific narrative if they wish to receive treatment. The narrative, which includes always feeling as if one were born in the "wrong" body, discourages the individual from identifying as an alternate gender, and maintains the essentialist binary. Though gender terms may be changeable, these processes become means of blocking such change.

However, given the study's concern with online spaces, how can this discussion be used in relation to online bodies and identities? The introductory chapter outlined a series of research questions that are addressed in terms of these conceptual frameworks. Butler's (1990; 1993; 2004) work frames two of the questions – firstly how online identity is performed, and secondly examining the impact of heteronormativity on online, embodied, performative identities. This theoretical discussion informs the study and enables a more theoretically driven approach to the analysis of online identity in Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) than has been undertaken previously. The following charts an overview of the research on identity in online spaces more broadly.

3.2 Performativity and Intelligibility Online: Text-Based Spaces

Early accounts of online spaces suggested that a disembodied and allegedly anonymous self leads to multiple identities. The most vocal proponent of multiple online identities in the 1990s was Sherry Turkle (1995). Taking a postmodern view of identity and technology, she put forward the idea that the internet challenges the idea of a unitary self by allowing users to experiment with identities in different spaces. Given the relatively early time in which this book was written, she was mostly concerned with text-based spaces, like MUDs, where users represent their identity solely through text, as discussed in the previous chapter. As a result, users could be more flexible in creating divergent personalities, but not in a pathological sense. Ultimately, Turkle (1995) sums up her position as follows:

> When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass. (Turkle, 1995: 177)

At the time, she believed that such activity had the potential to be therapeutic, though in her more recent work, Turkle (2011) has admitted that some of the people she met in the course of her study worried her, because some of them used the internet to replace social interaction. Yet, Turkle's original work remained influential.

This flexibility was also believed to extend to gender. Danet (1998) praised the text-based MUD for freeing users from the "tyranny of gender" (p.131), since users were able to identify their gender – either one that was congruent with their own, or select from a list of alternate genders. One of the more popular examples was LambdaMOO, a text-based online world in the late 1990s, in which users could identify themselves as a range of different genders, such as Spivak, neuter, or even the use of royal pronouns. Bassett (1997) holds that flexibility with gender was a

strong possibility in LambdaMOO, but even at this stage, users feared deception and its potential for causing conflict within the community. She cautiously stated that: "Lambda[MOO] may be regarded as a low-risk place to play out fantasies with an identity which may be discarded," (Bassett, 1997: 547). Consequently, she tries to reconcile the two facets of LambdaMOO – identity "play" often resulted in the reproduction of gender stereotypes, yet the possibility of "multiple subjectivity" remained an option to users, which could disrupt gender norms (Bassett, 1997: 550). Yet, the use of the alternate genders listed above was only ever limited in LambdaMOO, as most gender switching remained within the gender binary (Roberts and Parks, 1999). It is also important to reiterate Nakamura's (2002) concern about cybertyping mentioned in the previous chapter, where gender switching translated to switching within the gender binary rather than to the other pronouns that were available in LambdaMOO as listed above, such as the male users describing themselves as submissive, exotic geisha. Herring and Martinson (2004) also noted that gender experimentation relied on stereotypical notions of gender to convey the performance in text-based spaces. Such cybertypes are deeply heteronormative. It is thus important to examine intersections of identity, even in online spaces. These performative identities are very much based on racial and gendered stereotypes.

O'Brien (2001) questions the alleged disappearance of social difference, in the work of Turkle (1995) for example, which O'Brien (2001) attributes to disembodied online interaction. Where the body became "invisible", the power of difference was believed to have faded. Yet, O'Brien (2001) also points to how trying to hide one's gender was viewed with suspicion in text-based spaces, which resulted in prevalent gender policing:

We do not know how to behave in a gender-free environment. Once we travel beyond the frame of a gender-bound reality we are in an uncharted realm. The tendency in such a "space" is to (re)impose a meaningful order by mapping the space with known categories of distinction. (O'Brien, 2001: 85)

Alternatively, gender "sleuthing" may ensue where someone's perceived gender does not match the way they write. For example, it is assumed that men write more aggressively, whereas women write more supportively and emotionally (Herring and Martinson, 2004). The lack of cues in such textual spaces means that particular stereotypes become much more powerful, and users depend much more on what others reveal about themselves (Kendall, 2000). Like Bassett (1997), O'Brien (2001) believes in the possibility of transgressing the gender binary online, yet she recognises that it does not cease to exist. O'Brien (2001) ultimately concludes that multiplicity is seen as inauthentic by others, due to the emphasis placed on a single self in a single body. Gender switching online is only acceptable as long as one adheres to particular rules, such as revealing one's "true" gendered self when challenged. Some still believe that they can discern the "truth" from identity performances without such revelation (Kendall, 2000). In this way, the notion of authentic identity (van Zoonen, 2013) can be seen even at the earlier stage of online textual interaction, without an embodied avatar, and that this needed to be maintained through gender policing and implicitly contributing to the maintenance of heteronormativity.

The opportunity to experiment with gender and identity seemed possible, yet these accounts reveal how particular norms remained entrenched regardless. Particular modes of categorising others remained, which meant that attempts to be "multiple" relied on stereotypes. The kind of postmodern freedom claimed for these spaces

could not be achieved in the face of power relations drawn from offline life (Kendall, 2000; O'Brien, 2001). Moreover, the socio-cultural context in which these users and spaces were embedded remained important, but seemingly ignored by many researchers at this point. O'Brien (2001) points to the attributes of the overwhelmingly young white men who created such spaces at this point in time, who emphasised their views and values as the norm. Baym (1998) pointed to the culture of the online space being important for the toleration of multiple identities. In her research into a Usenet discussion board for American soap operas, the group expected a single username, or actual name, to be used at all times, along with greater levels of self-disclosure to the group than on similar boards. The culture of an online group could thus affect how identity could be performed. Jones (1998) also suggested that mutable identity would become less prominent as better forms of encryption were created, which were sought by governments. At the time, he posited that authentication of identity was not possible, so multiple identities seemed more likely prior to certain technological developments. However, as the types of sites available online have broadened, along with the addition of more visual spaces such as social media and online games, how has this issue of identity been addressed since?

3.3 Performative Identities in Newer Online Spaces

The internet now contains a wider range of sites in which performative identities can develop. These may change depending on the context in which the performative utterance is made. Facebook and similar social networks seem to warrant a fairly close approximation of one's offline identity to find existing friends, though such social networks may encourage an idealised version of the self (Turkle, 2011). Van Zoonen (2013) notes a trend of "identity management" since the terrorist attacks on

the World Trade Centre on 9/11 and the ensuing crackdown in national security (p.44). Moving away from the accounts of multiple identities discussed above, the body is believed to hold a single identity that can be authenticated, echoing O'Brien (2001). The political climate focuses on identity as quantifiable, such as biometric passports and whole body scanning, which tie identity to a few physical characteristics. This trend is culturally related to reality shows and makeover series, in which the participants are driven to reveal their "true" selves, whether through continuing scrutiny in a reality show, or being transformed from a dowdy but pleasant person, to showing their inner beauty on a more attractive exterior (van Zoonen, 2013). With the internet, she suggests that the more corporate approach of certain sites, such as Google and Facebook, prefers a single identity attached to a single user. If a user has more than one Facebook account, the system merges them, and Google will not allow more than one account per user either. Companies can thus tailor their advertising according to the single profile of an individual through social sorting, for example (ibid.). Van Zoonen (2013) identifies this tendency as the drive behind "authentic" online identities.

Online games are different however – the premise is that the player will use an avatar that need not resemble them at all. There is no need for the "authentic" approach demanded by other sites, and players can potentially experiment with what is effectively another body. The previous chapter noted the rise of authentic identity demands in online games however (Valkyrie, 2012). Players' genders are "tested" by other users to ensure a degree of "honesty" and "openness", whereby heteronormative demands must be met. This also includes the stereotype of male players using female avatars, who seemingly claim to objectify the avatar to secure their heterosexuality. Such players are deemed suspicious if "discovered", and may

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maintain that they simply like looking at a prettier female avatar. This also ties into Thornham's (2011) work on sociable, group play as a way of avoiding accusations of being a lonely gamer. Lupton (1995) noted how the computer hacker or nerd is represented as physically repugnant – often portrayed as overweight and unkempt. The lone male gamer is viewed similarly. In devoting hours to a game, the lone gamer is posited as a perverse social reject, whereas the male gamers Thornham interviewed were keen to characterise themselves as "normal" by demonstrating how they play games in a group with other members of the household to socialise.

> [The stereotype] hints at a *failure of masculinity* establishing the relationship with the technology rather than, for example, people. It hints at perverted sexuality, if not homosexuality, because it constructs the norm as social and as heteronormative (italics in original, Thornham, 2011: 69)

Simultaneously, the playing of games in a group provides an opportunity for homosocial bonding in a "safe" heteronormative environment, without the threat of being left alone with the technology. Thornham's respondents compared playing games in a group to watching television in the evening after work. Here we see these men attempting to resignify their play by distancing themselves from the stereotype and normalising their behaviour by repudiating the negative view of lone male gamers. Gaming culture is heteronormative across different types of games, which results in a close relationship between being a player and heteronormativity. Players must orient themselves in relation to such gender norms within the enactment of performative identity, both during group play offline, and online gaming. On the one hand, group gamers make heteronormative statements to prove that the "real me" is not a sad, lonely geek, and they are "really" a normal guy who happens to like playing games (Thornham, 2011). On the other hand, the avatar needs to match the

"real" gendered identity of the player or to prove a "true" heterosexuality to prevent accusations of either homosexuality or gender experimentation according to the stereotype. Online games and the identities formed by players are thus constrained by the desire to appear authentic within a heteronormative framework. This starts at the outset of a new game when designing a new avatar.

I argued above that creating an avatar is a performative act in the manner set out by Butler (1990), which is now considered in more depth. In doing so, players select a number of different features and identifications for their avatar, such as online race, gender, and appearance. This process was detailed in the introductory chapter. The player thus has the opportunity to establish their avatar in this act. This series of conscious decisions situates the player in a game within a framework of intelligibility. It has been suggested that players refer to their offline identity when creating an avatar. Boellstorff (2008) points to the belief in Second Life that an avatar shows what is "really" inside. This notion is contested by Shapiro (2010), who notes how Second Life avatars are mostly slim, have Caucasian features and adhere to Western norms of beauty, even though it is possible to create any kind of avatar in this world – it does not even need to be humanoid. The avatar becomes another way of demonstrating the "real me" in a similar vein to the cultural approach to identity put forward by van Zoonen (2013), but this is still very much along particular lines. Players assume authenticity as a given because of the way in which most of the internet is predicated upon a singular identity, with the avatar becoming an extension of offline identity, rather than a separate entity. Yet, this does not prevent players from creating idealised identities. The trend of stereotypical identities has also been continued from text-based spaces. At this point, it is important to consider some of the gaming norms that were touched on in the previous chapter from a more

theoretical perspective. This forms part of the social context that frames the performance of identity, along with the notions of authenticity and heteronormativity. The following is intended to clarify the relationship between these notions and to locate the social context within a theoretical framework.

In terms of Butler's (1990; 1993; 2004) work, it could be suggested that these players are looking to establish themselves within the norms of intelligibility that are partly extended from offline life and within online games. Butler offers some ideas that can be used to explore both how an identity can be established in an online space, as well as teasing out how offline and online spaces intermingle through the (re)production of norms. Bromseth and Sundén (2011) draw on their respective studies of different internet cultures to explore the queer[12] possibilities of the internet. They note that queer spaces exist online, but still tend to be side-lined or "over-shadowed by – or embedded in – significantly larger structures of social networking sites with ready-made identity menus and pre-coded profiles," (p.274). Here they refer to Facebook for example, where different identity options can be displayed, however gender can only be male or female. By setting out the possibilities of representation in advance, such sites set the limits of intelligibility according to the developers' norms. Such pre-profiling means that online spaces retain a strong heteronormative character. In certain accounts of gaming, a similar tendency remains present too, with game designers' decisions shaping certain features from the outset, such as avatar appearance (Taylor, 2003; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009).

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[12] The authors use the term queer in relation to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) websites./

Thornham's (2011) considers how games and gaming as a pastime are also culturally embedded in heteronormativity, and thus gendered in particular ways.

> [Gaming] is gendered because the wider utilizable discourses to which each individual can turn to in order to outline pleasure, desire, or investment, is deeply gendered. What are ultimately produced, are carefully regimented performances, which continue to *produce* gaming along traditional, heteronormative lines. It becomes apparent that gaming is not only about a particular game or situation: it is also pleasure, desire, performance, identification, and depends perhaps most importantly (to reiterate Butler's phrase) on who is imagining whom. (italics in original, Thornham, 2011: 48-49).

Her interviews with female gamers suggest a dismissal of their hobby, whereby they still define gaming as a masculine pastime, and talk about gaming in a way that fits with what women are *supposed* to enjoy, as opposed to what they *actually* enjoy. Walkerdine (2007) also noted such dismissive comments in her interviews with girls about gaming as well. Thornham (2011) holds that such comments are performative acts that enable the female gamer to play, even if there is a dissonance between what they say and do. Research into online games has pointed to the assumption that everyone else is a (straight) man until proven otherwise, especially with regards to hyper-gendered female avatars (Sundén, 2009) Nevertheless, Sundén's (2009) study of a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) guild in the online game World of Warcraft demonstrated how all players were still assumed to be men, even in one of the only LGBT guilds in the game. Taylor's (2012) account of the professional gaming scene emphasises the exclusion of female players, who are deemed to be less skilful intruders, drawing funds and attention away from allegedly superior male

players. The norms of intelligibility that pervade these gaming spaces remain coded as masculine. Bromseth and Sundén (2011) believe that the potential remains for women gamers to transgress gender boundaries in this area.

> An appropriation of game technologies can thus be a quite powerful activity, transgressive in its challenging of the technological masculine. Female players could in this sense be understood as engaging in non-normative, or even anti-normative ways of doing femininity through their culturally illegitimate couplings with straight masculinity, technology and power. (Bromseth and Sundén, 2011: 288)

In this way, they seem to echo Butler's calls for subversive approaches to gender. Given the strong association of gaming and technology with masculinity more broadly, women in games could be viewed as pushing the boundaries of intelligibility. Yet, pressure not to participate remains strong, due to the culture and social context of gaming. Having considered the relationship between heteronormativity, gender and gaming thoroughly, it is now important to revisit the problem of 'race'/race in relation to performativity, which is also part of the research questions. This encompasses both the performative approach to offline 'race', and the ways in which gaming represents 'race'.

3.4 Performativity and the Social Construction of 'Race'

In chapter two, I put forward the notion of considering game race in a more performative fashion, rather than simply looking at the racial signifiers embedded in the game. The academic research into 'race' and performativity tends to focus on specific notions such as racial passing, where an individual can confound normative ideas around 'race' if they have a lighter skin tone for example. Ehlers (2012) holds

that Butler's notion of performativity can highlight how 'race' has no inherent truth, and the ways in which the individual is "produced" as raced via racial discipline (p.7). Alexander (2006) uses the notion of performativity in his queer analysis of his own performance of the stereotype of the "bad black man", where he often rejects the stereotype in how he lives, but strategically uses it when the need arises, despite how it reinforces certain ideas about black men (p.85). However, the relative lack of interest in using performativity with 'race' could also be attributed to the contentious claims that could be made, such as the potential for covering up 'race' to make it less visible, and the need to recognise the lived experience of racism. Though in the following I put forward ways of examining 'race' and game race in a performative sense, it is done so with caution.

Everett (2010) notes how a performative approach to 'race' examines how it is 'done' in the same way as gender. By emphasising how 'race' is socially constructed, it must be seen as a process, and learnt in the same way as gender. Butler's (1993) writing on 'race' is more concerned with passing, where black individuals may be able to pass as white, if they do not openly declare themselves to be black, and have a lighter skin tone that does not make their 'race' so visible. Mercer (1994) considers the way in which black hair can be constituted politically, for example. Straightening of black hair can be seen as mimicking white hair, eschewing the "natural" afro or dreadlocks. Yet, Mercer (1994) notes the claim that an afro is natural and closer to African hair is a myth, in contrast to the different ways braiding is used in various African countries. Fast-forward nearly twenty years and a more technological form of performativity can be examined – genetic testing. In the absence of genealogical records, due to the slave trade, racial testing to determine the origins of one's ancestors has been popularised by celebrities such as

Oprah Winfrey (Nelson and Hwang, 2012). In this way, the individual can claim a racial identity based on scientific data in varying degrees of detail depending on the price they can afford. This has triggered a wave of individuals uploading videos to YouTube of themselves with a letter from a genetic testing company declaring an affiliation with a country, or an area of a continent, such as sub-Saharan Africa. The video would sometimes start with the user collecting a DNA sample to be sent for testing, but most were centred on a "reveal", in which the user is filmed opening an envelope, containing a letter and sometimes a map. For example, one video features a self-defined black male user discovering he has European ancestry on his father's side, which he claims he already knew about, but his final words to the camera are "Peace! Black Power!", which the authors hold is a reinforcement of his self-definition as a black man, rather than European DNA posing a question to his identity (ibid.: 279). These can be construed as part of a search for a "true" racial self that is defined scientifically, though it still seems to be open to reinterpretation according to how the user "feels" about this heritage, and whether it affects them in the present. Though somewhat disparate, both Mercer's (1994) observations regarding hair, and Nelson and Hwang's (2012) research on genetic testing become performative statements of 'race'. With the former, attempts to "whiten" hair, or presenting "natural" hair become statements about the racialised self; with the latter, genetic "truths" may have implications for how one views one's 'race'. These become performative statements that are part of the "doing" of 'race'.

The YouTube videos also point to how 'race' can be 'done' online. This chapter has often reiterated the perception that the body is allegedly invisible online, which in turn directs attention away from 'race'. If whiteness becomes a default online (Nakamura, 2002), 'race' can only be performed online through utterances that

render the body visible in some way, much like Butler's (1993) observations of racial passing above. Alternatively, some online spaces become racially coded. Boyd (2012) and Hargittai (2012) agree that social networking sites can become imbued with racialised cultural meanings. As part of a national project into young people's internet use, danah boyd (2012) interviewed teenagers about their social media and networking habits. She noticed that teens talked about social networking sites in contrasting ways depending on their 'race'. For most of the teenagers interviewed, self-segregation was common where they followed pre-existing peer networks online. Facebook's clean lines and simple formatting were perceived as more bourgeois, thus more popular with white and Asian young people. MySpace could be personalised according to the user's preferences, and remained popular with black young people when Facebook became more prominent. White young people framed MySpace as trashy, in contrast to the elegance of Facebook's design (boyd, 2012). Hargittai (2012) conducted surveys around the same time with undergraduates examining if the growth of online social networking would improve the social lives of students living in a parental home. Her findings concluded that online social networking did not have such an effect, however she also confirmed boyd's (2012) qualitative research. Undergraduate students also used different social networking sites depending on their 'race'. Their work clearly points towards a worrying racialization of social networking, which could potentially lead to a form of segregation.

'Race' is also framed in video games in particular ways too. In the emergent literature on 'race' in video games, Leonard (2006) puts forward the notion that certain games teach and reinforce normative ideas about 'race'. He points to the likes of Grand Theft Auto purveying particular stereotypes of 'race' that stigmatise

specific groups. Game designers emphasise the need for "authentic" settings to make the game believable, which results in "gangster", ghetto, and urban settings with primarily black characters. The effect is a form of "high-tech blackface", which refers to how such games encourage a pernicious approach to occupying a racial identity in a game vicariously (Leonard, 2006: 86). Leonard (2006) particularly emphasises how games give players the chance to play a 'race', but in a stereotypical fashion, in the same way as a cybertype. Once again, the social context of gaming and the cultures in which it is embedded remain important. Game designers create a product with pre-existing views in mind, both concerning the social world as it exists, and the alleged expectations of its audience (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009). This also points to the importance of the previous chapter, and reinforces the need to establish the social context of gaming. In relation to the work of Butler (1990; 1993), the depiction of 'race' in games means that players are only able to perform a racist stereotype, grounded in an allegedly 'authentic' setting, which continues to reinforce particular notions of minority ethnic groups. This also demonstrates how authenticity in gaming can be framed in different ways – not just in terms of identity performance, but also the setting in which the performance takes places and the body of the avatar being used by the player. Authenticity is also related to the performance of 'race' in games, as well as heteronormativity. The previous chapter outlined the issues behind game race in MMORPGs like Final Fantasy XIV specifically, which is also relevant to this discussion, and needs to be revisited.

MMORPGs have different settings to those outlined by Leonard (2006). Many are typically based on the fantasy canon, and Final Fantasy XIV is no exception. Chapter two suggested how stereotypes around particular races can form (Monson, 2012). In this respect, players have expectations from these stereotypes around the

performance of avatars, and thus make assumptions regarding the player using them. The characteristics of the race are attached to the identity of the player, due to the notion of authenticity, through which the avatar is viewed as an extension of the offline self. In the findings presented in chapter seven, my respondents' opinions on the races in Final Fantasy XIV are examined in terms of the dominant norms attached to each of the races, which players tend to associate with the player's offline identity, even if this is not the case. For example, the Elezen race is often seen as arrogant, which is believed to reveal the player's "inner self". Though there are stereotypical notions around particular races in the game, authenticity can be troubled by the notion of meta-roleplay. This was a term used by certain respondents to explain their relationship with their avatar. Roleplay is a relatively marginal practice within online gaming, where the player formulates a narrative about their avatar in keeping with the game's framework, and performs as if they *are* the avatar (Tronstad, 2008). These particular respondents enjoyed the notion of roleplay, but did not take it to such a full extent. Instead, they examined different aspects of the avatar, such as its race, to get into character. This affects the performance of the avatar, with certain races encouraging the player to speak in certain ways.

The previous chapter noted the problem of the child-centric approach in particular types of gaming research, yet this is also important for understanding the ways in which the players talk about roleplay. Thornham's (2011) adult gamers were keen to reject childish forms of enjoyment and play, and I argue that this also extends into online gaming and roleplay. To admit enjoying roleplay would mean admitting to the enjoyment of a childish form of play, which involves the use of imagination in pretending to be someone else. The concept of meta-roleplay emphasises creativity

in a more rational, thoughtful, and above all adult fashion, without the need to necessarily admit to others that the player enjoys this type of play.

Nevertheless, avatar race creates a different dynamic with authenticity. Setting aside meta-roleplay for the moment, players refer to stereotypes around races in enacting an identity. In the course of playing an online game, players internalise the stereotypes relating to each race, such as the expectation that Elves are narcissistic and bigoted (Monson, 2012), and they must maintain a performative identity on the basis of those norms. Returning to van Zoonen's (2013) notion of authentic identity, with avatar race, the focus shifts to the body of the avatar as the location for a raced identity, rather than with gender and authentic identity, which emphasises the biological sex of the player as the test for authentic identity. The relationship between the raced avatar body and authentic identity is examined in greater detail in chapter seven.

To sum up, the above sections point to how the work of Butler can be used in relation to gaming and the internet. Heteronormative values are perpetuated in these new spaces. O'Brien (2001) noted that the internet should not be viewed as a vacuum without rules – in the absence of rules, users will incorporate their own. This in turn affects intelligibility, especially considering that the range of identity cues is considerably reduced compared to offline life. Moreover, van Zoonen's (2013) suggestion of the demands of singular identity and authenticity points to another constraint in online identity. To gain a clearer picture of how identities are formed in online spaces, Butler's work on performativity and intelligibility offers a means of analysing how particular ways of being are permitted over others in online games.

The analysis chapters examine these notions in relation to the work of Butler (1990; 1993) in the following ways. Chapter five focuses on the "doing" of identity, and how the players explained social interaction with others. This is framed by data drawn from interviews and forums, where players explained how they used "emotes", which are embodied gestures used by avatars to convey emotional meaning, as well as learning the norms associated with social interaction through an avatar. Then, chapter six turns to heteronormativity in online gaming, and how it affects the possibilities for avatar gender, as well as the linking of particular behaviours with homosexuality, and the problem of homophobia among elements of the community. Heteronormativity and homophobia are especially evident on the forum, for example, where players discussed the embodiment of each race and how large female avatars "should" not exist as female avatars ought to be small and petite. Finally, chapter seven considers the relationship between 'race' in the sociological sense and game race, to see how players perform race in the game, and the performative attempts to exclude notions of 'race' from gaming culture. This chapter discusses how respondents described "talking" as the avatar to get into character to meet the expectations of other players. Data from the forum is considered in regard to the exclusion of 'race' from discussions of the game, partly in terms of reinforcing the whiteness of the fantasy genre, as well as arguments about the behaviour of Japanese players towards Euro-American players.

However, Butler's discursive approach to embodiment does not seem to adequately conceptualise the avatar as a form of embodiment, which is integral to this study's concern with how players use the avatar in ways similar to the offline body. Indeed, she has been criticised for missing the materiality of the body by focusing on the way in which the body is subject to social norms (Shilling, 2012). The visibility of

'race' and the possibility of racial passing offer another way of considering the body in her work, as well as her later discussions of GID and intersex, yet this is insufficient for the purposes of this study. Another point in this section has been the alleged erasure of the body online, which is the starting point for much of the work concerning online identity. To examine both the avatar as a form of embodiment as well as the embodied relationship between the player and the avatar, this chapter now examines material that addresses this aspect of the research questions.

3.5 Embodiment: The Avatar as Digital Body

It has been suggested that the avatar is treated like a form of embodiment by players (Taylor, 2002). Avatars are viewed as a social representation of the player in the space and create a sense of presence in the world by locating the player (ibid.). The surface of the avatar is also treated as material to be worked on through various means of changing appearance. Shilling's (2012) work on body projects seems useful here, which posit the body as a constant site of work by the individual, as a means of displaying identity externally. Avatars are treated similarly, as matter that is important to the player for conveying a certain appearance, and maintaining certain aspects of the player's embodiment. One respondent went as far as suggesting that his avatar needed to be tall to match his own larger stature. Though these avatars may seem like imagined matter that is less important than a "real" body, I argue that the avatar matters deeply to players.

> It is instead through the *use* of a body as *material* in the dynamic performance of identity and social life that users come to be 'made real' – that they come to experience immersion… (italics in original, Taylor, 2002: 42)

The avatar remains an important link between the player and the online game to heighten the sense of immersion in a world, and to connect with other players.

However, I also seek to problematise the relationship between the player and avatar further. Though studies of the internet have increasingly demonstrated the links between the online and offline (Baym, 2009; Ess and Consalvo, 2011), the notion that the internet is disembodied still holds sway in popular discourse. Shilling (2005) emphasises the disembodied nature of online interaction, which allegedly increases the risk of deception and the erosion of community spirit:

> These virtual groups [sic] clearly do not fulfil all the conditions of mutual responsibility and caring valued by communitarians… This lack of physical co-presence and full sensory involvement also heightens the possibilities of fraud in on-line relationships. (Shilling, 2005: 192-3)

Here, Shilling (2005) discusses text-based online environments, which were prevalent at the time of writing. Nevertheless, he focuses on the relationship between disembodiment and deception. To return to the notion of authenticity, Shilling (2005) suggests that the lack of physical co-presence will give rise to deceptive, risky behaviour, but neglects the relationship between the body and the internet. Instead, he argues that the invisibility of the body, much like the early work on online identity discussed above, results in the corrosion of communities and moral behaviour. Earlier in this chapter, the work of van Zoonen (2013) suggested a different approach. A single identity is still presumed in many online spaces, where the body is allegedly invisible. This study points to how the internet does not create a disembodied identity, but the body is assumed to be there still at the keyboard. The

remainder of the chapter revisits the links between embodiment, identity and the internet to see how the avatar body complicates matters.

Bromseth and Sundén (2011) hold that "… issues of embodiment online highlight the many connections – and possible disconnections – between the body performing (at the keyboard) and the body being performed (onscreen)," (p.275). The authors suggest that such online bodies, including avatars, trouble how we also view the offline self. I wish to take this idea further by exploring the work of Grosz (1994; 2001) and Hayles (1999) to analyse the ways in which the player's embodiment mediates the relationship with the avatar. To move away from the conception of the internet as disembodied, it seems important to examine how the player's body at the keyboard is crucial to the interaction with the game. This can be achieved through an examination of how players' "embodied knowledge" (Hayles, 1999: 202), which refers to physical movements, structures their relationship with the avatar's embodiment, as well as the possibilities for performative identity, which partially depend on embodied actions. Players' implicit knowledge of movement comes to the fore in manipulating an avatar. Moreover, attempts to theorise the role of the body in gaming focus on the idea of the game doing something *to* the gamer, rather than the player taking an active role (Thornham, 2011). Now this chapter turns to the idea of body projects and how players work on the surface of the avatar as part of performative identity.

3.5.1 Avatar as surface: Identity on its Body

Shilling (2003) points to more recent trends in studies of the body, which are useful for this study. Initially, he criticises the social constructionist view offered by

Foucault (and preferred by Butler) as reducing the body to discourse and ignoring the materiality of the body.

> Once the body is contained within modern disciplinary systems, it is the mind which takes over as the location for discursive power. Consequently, the body tends to be reduced to an inert mass which is controlled by discourses centred on the mind. However, this mind is itself disembodied; we get no sense of the mind's location within an active human body. (Shilling, 2003: 70-1)

Shilling has instead referred to Giddens' idea of "body projects" which emphasise the ways in which the body is worked on by the individual. Though there are overlaps with Foucault's (1977) "docile body", the body project consists of the individual treating the body as material to be shaped, partly according to social norms, such as maintaining a healthy body, and partly to signify identity. The body project can be perceived as part of the growth in consumer culture, whereby the body becomes part of a display of identity, through body modification (such as tattoos), and clothing (Shilling, 2003). Looking forward, Shilling also recognises the potential for posthuman possibilities around embodiment through technological advances in virtual reality, biotechnical implants and medical nanotechnology. These are referred to as "body options", which offer the potential to artificially advance evolution (Shilling, 2003: 190). Though such ideas seem to incorporate elements of the social constructionist view (such as the hegemonic status of the healthy body, and the duty of self-care), they retain the reflexive element of Giddens' work, which reasserts the possibility of individuals acting on the body, rather than the limited options in the Foucauldian version (ibid.). Shilling's (2012) recent update to this book briefly touches on the role of new technology in shifting the senses away from the body

towards other foci such as online spaces, as well as decentring identity from the body on to other sites, such as avatars or usernames. However, he also notes Hayles' (1999) point that cyberculture research (work examining different aspects of cybernetics and cyberspace culture) privileges information over embodiment, which makes the body seem absent, despite its presence. The senses shift, however, in using new technology, yet this should not lessen our concern with the body.

However, considering that Shilling's (2003; 2012) work focuses on the corporeal body, what does this offer a study of avatars? Taylor (2002) has pointed to the avatar making the player feel present in an online world. When creating an avatar, she points to the need to "bind the pair" to cement the relationship and emotional attachment between the player and the avatar and create the feeling that the avatar is a projection of the player into the game space (Taylor, 2003: 29). The avatar also enables the player to situate herself in the space (ibid.). Many other types of video game involve some form of avatar for the same reason. Nevertheless, the most prevalent form of avatar seems to be humanoid (Shapiro, 2010). Boellstorff's (2008) observation about avatars as a means of showing the player's "true" identity seems to echo Shilling's work on the body as a part of consumer culture, for example. Both the surface of the avatar and the corporeal body are part of the expression of identity. However, a Second Life avatar is far easier to modify than the offline corporeal body, given that new avatars can be bought in Second Life, or altered at any time. Though many online games do not offer so many options, different types of equipment such as clothing can be bought to alter the appearance of the avatar in most online games (Castronova, 2005). Such equipment can signify the avatar's status, for example a powerful avatar with rare equipment can show off the skill of the player.

Shapiro (2010) also points to the avatar being subject to a range of norms just as much as corporeal bodies. Similar pressure to present the avatar in particular ways remains, such as being slim, and adhering to Western norms of beauty. Pearce and Artemesia (2009) also discuss how the players from the Myst online game remained attached to aesthetic choices that were taken from the Myst game they had started in, deliberately selecting similar clothing in other online worlds, and consulting other players from the same game regarding the appropriateness of their decisions to maintain the group identity. Earlier in this chapter and the last, the input of game designers in the appearance of avatars was highlighted (Taylor, 2006; Pearce and Artemesia, 2009). The appearance of avatars in online games is framed in advance, with racial and gendered characteristics driving the avatar body project's possibilities. These ideas around embodiment offer another avenue to explore the complicated links between offline and online life. Players still treat the avatar as if it were a body project. Yet, there has been less recognition of this in conceptual terms, which needs to be more fully redressed to examine the avatar body in a more sociological fashion, and to counter the claims that internet use is disembodied. This also points to how the avatar can be viewed partly as a separate body, away from the notion of a single body housing one identity, and partly an extension of the player's identity into a separate space, which is resituated according to the frameworks of intelligibility that exist in this space. In turn, the player is encouraged to identify with the avatar through this process.

3.5.2 The internet and (dis)embodiment

One of the problematic assumptions in some studies of online cultures is the notion that internet use is disembodied. Above, Turkle (1995) was cited with regard to this issue, when she talks about stepping through the screen creating a disjuncture

between online and offline. Her approach suggests a Cartesian split, which was criticised in chapter two. This perspective ignores the internet user's body sitting at the computer, typing and clicking. Though one's attention is elsewhere, using the internet does not negate the body.

Grosz (1994) points to a similar issue within philosophy. She seeks to problematise the emphasis on the mind over the body, and the associations between woman/body and man/mind. Such dualism has resulted in the separation of consciousness from the corporeal body, which in turn has caused the mind to be elevated over the body, especially in disciplines such as philosophy. She also believes that feminism has failed to engage sufficiently with this problem, which is troubling because of women's association with the body, and the allegedly fragile nature of women's bodies, which is partly used to justify patriarchy. Grosz's (1994) analysis examines a series of different works concerning the mind and body relationship to explore how this connection can be perceived. In this work, she refers to the Möbius strip as a way of viewing the connection – the two are never completely separate, though they may travel along separate planes, they still meet in the middle at the point of torsion.

Grosz (2001) continues with these ideas in relation to virtual reality settings and online spaces.

> The fantasy of disembodiment is that of autogenesis, a megalomaniacal attempt to provide perfect control in a world where things tend to become messy, complicated, or costly; it is a control fantasy. The idea that one could take on a second-order or virtual body and somehow leave one's real body behind with no trace or residue, with no effects or repercussions, is a luxury afforded the male subject. (Grosz, 2001: 43)

To this end, she suggests that it is unsustainable to view the virtual and the real as separate, no matter how much this notion is repeated in discourse. Such a control fantasy means that virtual reality enables a liberal subject that lacks any commitment. The loss of corporeal presence leads to fears around new technology and the potential detriment to face-to-face interaction, which can also be perceived in Shilling's (2005) concern regarding online interaction discussed above. However, Grosz (2001) believes that the mind and body cannot be separated in this way, and thus the "real" and virtual cannot either. Indeed, she refers to the virtual as being more like an augmentation of the "real" that forms a complementary relationship. There has been more recognition of the intertwined nature of offline and online spaces more recently, and the two need to be considered alongside each other (Baym, 2009; Ess and Consalvo, 2011).

Hayles (1999) starts from a similar point to Grosz, in that she posits how cybernetic theory, as well as much posthuman thought, has ignored the body. Much like Grosz's (1994) perception of philosophy as male-dominated, hence creating the privilege of mind over body, Hayles alludes to the equally male-dominated area of cybernetics and information theory. She holds that the body needs to be more frequently considered in this area. Though less concerned by the mind/body split than Grosz, Hayles (1999) points to the impact of embodiment on technology. Male researchers in the area of cybernetics, such as Hans Moravec, conflate the utopia of man joining with machines with the disappearance of the material body or its dismissal as mere 'meat'. Hayles counters this by positing the relationship between technology and embodiment in such a way that the two cannot be separated, echoing Haraway's (1991) cyborg that unites the body and machine. Embodiment remains culturally embedded according to Hayles (1999), so it cannot be easily dismissed.

> Whereas the body can disappear into information with scarcely a murmur of protest, embodiment cannot, for it is tied to the circumstances of the occasion and the person. (Hayles, 1999: 196)

In this way, Hayles characterises the relationship between the body and embodiment as intertwined but in tension. The body is the abstract form of the pair, whereas embodiment for Hayles is more specific to a particular context. Though the body can be ignored, she perceives how embodiment cannot. This is through the relationship between incorporating and inscribing practices, which have been used to perceive how the body is assimilated into culture in the work of Connerton (1989). For example, children are instructed how to sit according to gender, through the observation of others, and verbal corrections.

> Showing someone how to stand is easy, but describing in words all the nuances of the desired posture is difficult. Incorporating practices perform the bodily content; inscribing practices correct and modulate the performance. Thus incorporating and inscribing practices work together to create cultural constructs. (Hayles, 1999: 199)

Such constructs also include gender by inculcating the appropriate way of doing something within a particular gender. Butler (1990) stresses the importance of gender in an embodied form, with the process of "gendering" leading to individuals still being taught particular ways of sitting and so on. Hayles (1999) also suggests that incorporating practices become a part of "embodied knowledge" (p.202). Though it is open to a degree of flux in certain contexts, it is resistant to change, but partly walled off from consciousness because of its habitual nature. However, she

makes the following point regarding change wrought by technology in incorporating practices.

> Formed by technology at the same time that it creates technology, embodiment mediates between technology and discourse by creating new experiential frameworks that serve as boundary marker for the creation of corresponding discursive systems. In the feedback loop between technological innovations and discursive practices, incorporation is a crucial link. (Hayles, 1999: 204)

Much like the previous example of children being taught how to sit, another example here is that of learning to type. This practice is partly inscribing, since it generates written words, but also incorporating as it depends on the typist's skill. Typing also mediates the experience of technology, for example using a computer, and hence creates the relationship between embodiment and the internet. With online games, players use a combination of keys and mouse to move the avatar in the game space. Nevertheless, the process of learning how to move is a form of incorporating practice that requires a degree of patience. New players (or noobs/newbies) can often be spotted due to their lack of expertise in moving around and manipulating the avatar (Williams, 2007; Boellstorff, 2008). The other important point concerns how players move their avatars around in the game space. There is a learning process to all games and online worlds, which tap into existing embodied knowledge on two levels. Firstly, the game designers make use of this knowledge in creating avatars that move realistically. Secondly, players use their embodied knowledge to interpret moving the avatar around, and in the enactment of performative identity. Chapter five examines how players use their avatars to interact with others, and their use of embodied knowledge to enact a performative identity. This discussion draws on

screenshots from participant observation in the game to analyse how social interaction can be accomplished using an avatar, as well as respondents' accounts. Auron explained in detail how he and his friends used different layers of communication to talk to each other, ranging from actual conversation, and private and public chat in the game.

Here the relationship between the player's mind, embodiment and the avatar becomes clearer. The ability of the player to make the most of incorporating practices is important for engaging in play, as well as demonstrating the mediating effect of embodiment in this process. Lupton (1995) points to the emotional relationship with a computer for example, which is fraught with fear (risk, viruses, breakdown) and pleasure. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) note the sensorial elements of play, such as sight and sound, as well as kinaesthetic pleasure derived from the experience, and the embodied nature of these. In some instances, the involvement of the player's body in the experience of gaming can be quite literal, where the player's body is subjected to crisis through overly long periods of play. For example, in Final Fantasy XI a battle with a monster named Absolute Virtue lasted 18 hours or longer, and led to players vomiting and passing out due to fatigue, which resulted in the designers altering the battle (Leray, 2008). While this example is extreme, it serves as a reminder of the embodied experience of play.

Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) also hold that affect represents another way of examining the relationship between the player and the game, by focusing on aspects such as emotions (including those of the authors), gut feeling and tactile attachments. Such elements also point to the enactment of play as it occurs between the game and the player, and the close relationship between the two. Games encourage a close emotional investment from the player, and Final Fantasy XIV players are especially

invested. The majority had previously played Final Fantasy XI for up to ten years before switching to Final Fantasy XIV, and felt extremely attached to the series as a whole. This also meant that few of them felt the same way about other online games. Players need to be emotionally invested in a game to keep playing, which is manipulated to an extent by the designers, but this particular group sets itself apart from other player communities. Moreover, the structure of the payment system, which charged players extra fees if they had more than one avatar (unlike other online games), meant that most only used one avatar. Final Fantasy XIV continued this system, which has resulted in an even closer bond with a single avatar, so the performative identity is limited to a single avatar body. These points exemplify similar ideas to Grosz (1994) in terms of the mind-body relationship. With such spaces, there is a blurring to some extent between them. Nevertheless, the body does not disappear, and remains at the keyboard, but with an emotional and corporeal connection.

Some attempts to formulate a connection between players and video games in the past have resulted in more of a focus on what video games do *to* players (Thornham, 2011). This view suggests how players react to what occurs on-screen in quick succession, and that narratives in games are absorbed by the player who reframes them as a form of story-telling. Crawford (2012) is also keen to re-examine the embodied relationship, but his focus is continuously on the body of the player, rather than the avatar as well. While the players' reactions are important, a more theoretically rigorous approach seems vital at this point, applying both the work of Shilling (2003; 2012) regarding the body project, as well as the avatar as a socially embodied entity, combining the works of Hayles and Grosz. The embodied aspect of

avatars is thus a recurring theme in the analysis chapters. For example, chapter five includes a consideration of the learning process behind moving an avatar in space.

Returning to the notion of embodied knowledge, I argue that being able to situate an avatar in the game's environment taps into a player's existing embodied knowledge from everyday life. Taylor (2002) notes that many norms around positioning oneself in relation to others in social interaction have been absorbed into online spaces that rely on avatars. This includes placing the avatar near to another when conversing, or signalling particular emotions such as anger by placing avatars very close together (Taylor, 2002). Such embodied knowledge is key for making progress in a game and seeing the connection between technology and embodiment more generally. Examining the embodied aspect of interaction in online games can provide another angle with regard to social interaction on the internet. It also offers a way of further exploring the relationship between offline and online life. Chapter five examines how players learn how to enact identity through emotes and chat, which involve replicating aspects of social interaction in these spaces. Given the opportunity to use an embodied avatar, players find creative ways to communicate with each other. Additionally, the other two analysis chapters examine the role of the body project, in relation to the role of the avatar in shaping the "doing" of identity, especially with regard to meta-roleplay outlined above.

To sum up, there are two ways of looking at the avatar's digital body. The surface of the avatar can be considered a body project, in the sense used by Shilling (2012), to signify how the player's identity can be portrayed on the body of the avatar. This may be in a very literal sense, with an avatar designed to closely resemble the player, or in some instances in very specific ways, with a particular facial feature that links them. The relationship between the avatar and the player in terms of incorporating

practices and social interaction is also key. Embodied knowledge is easily transferred into an online game. In performative terms, the avatar body is used to enact identity as well. These two approaches to the avatar as a digital embodiment are used throughout the analysis chapters to interrogate the data.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has set out the theoretical aspects of the thesis, to further consolidate the contextualisation that is referred to in later chapters. It began by setting out the work of Judith Butler (1990; 1993; 2004) in relation to performativity and heteronormativity. Performative identity is enacted via a process, giving the illusion of stability. Yet, it is also constrained by particular norms of intelligibility, such as heteronormativity, which is another important conceptual tool in this thesis that enables an examination of the reinforcement of the heterosexual ideal online. The study of online identity has been under-theorised in some respects, whereas Butler's (1990; 1993; 2004) work offers a way of conceptualising how identity is enacted online. By examining heteronormativity in the context of authentic identity (van Zoonen, 2013), it is possible to see how gender becomes a way of testing the player's identity, where the gender of the player and avatar must be congruent to be considered honest. With game race, despite the potential for meta-roleplay put forward by my respondents, the avatar's race and performative identity must match according to the prevailing stereotypes attached to a particular race. While gender is expected to be congruent between the body of the player and the avatar, race is more focused on the avatar body, and the performative identity enacted by the player, which must fit a set of expectations. These points underpin the analysis chapters, which explore how offline social norms are perpetuated in online spaces, and their effect on the possibilities for the enactment of identity. Chapters six and seven focus

on gender, sexuality and 'race'/race to analyse how social norms remain important online. These two chapters especially draw on interviews, where my respondents detailed how they created their avatars and the reasons for particular choices, such as gender.

This leads into the chapter's other main concern, which is embodiment. Alongside the claims regarding authentic identity and the body, the avatar can be analysed in two ways. Firstly, the avatar can be viewed as a body project (Shilling 2003; 2012) as it signifies identity to other players. This can range from the equipment it uses, to the appearance produced through gender and game race. Secondly, embodied knowledge (Hayles, 1999), which is transferred from everyday life, structures social interaction through avatars and points to the relationship between the mind and body (Grosz, 1994). The avatar also becomes a part of the performative identity through embodied knowledge, which is used to enact the performative identity through social interaction. These conceptual tools inform the remainder of the thesis, and enable an analysis of the avatar as an embodied representative of the player and its role in the enactment of identity. The following chapter concerns the methodology of the study, and comprises a consideration of the research methods, ethics and the epistemological position.

Chapter 4 Researching Online: Methods and Methodology

This chapter explores the epistemological, methodological, and ethical aspects of the study and describes in detail the methods used to generate data. The research questions outlined in the introductory chapter consider how performative identity is enacted online, and the role of the avatar as a digital embodiment. Additionally, they also examine the different ways in which social norms can operate online and the effect on performative identity. The existing research examined in chapter two, such as the effects research, was criticised for ignoring the wider gaming audience, and I argued that the methods employed were designed to reconfirm the existing viewpoints of the researchers who assumed that video games must be a problem. Newman (2004) holds that this is due to a reticence among researchers to examine gaming from a gamer's perspective. Moreover, examining the avatar as a form of embodiment that shapes how identity can be performed in this space encourages looking at different ways of conducting research. Though the internet is not a separate space from everyday life, the way in which interaction takes place online often necessitates taking an alternative approach to offline social research. In this sense, the potential respondents may meet in different ways, such as in the game, on forums, on social media and so on. The fieldwork lasted for just under a year, and was divided into three parts:

- a period of participant observation in the game Final Fantasy XIV and its related spaces, such as forums, lasting from its launch on 23rd September 2010, until early January 2011, totalling four months, though the game was played continuously throughout fieldwork, where time allowed. The game was played for approximately four to five times per week for around three

hours per session in the participant observation phase, equating to roughly 175 hours of play in this period alone. Later periods were more sporadic.

- 36 online, asynchronous interviews conducted with players from two forums between January and February 2011, divided into two waves of 12 from one forum, 23 from the other, and one other who knew one of the respondents from the first wave.

- a period of observation in the game's official forum from early March until late August 2011, lasting nearly six months.

Throughout, I continued to play the game where possible, and kept records of changes to it over this period. During fieldwork, Final Fantasy XIV was in a state of flux following an unsuccessful launch and due to its restructuring, the game changed very quickly. For interviews, it was important to be up-to-date about particular aspects of the game, and while observing the forum, players were vocal about proposed changes to the game. I also maintained a fieldwork diary during this time. This was based on bullet point notes made during play or interviews that were regularly written up into reflexive, dated entries.

The issue of representing online spaces in research can be complicated by certain factors. Firstly, the research site needs to be carefully defined, as online spaces can be "nebulous" (Rutter and Smith, 2005: 81). Some ethnographic studies focus on a game or online world, such as Boellstorff (2008) who exclusively uses data from in-world observations as well as focus groups and interviews conducted in Second Life. Yet, online and offline video games extend well beyond their boundaries. Taylor (2006) notes the rise of forums, guild websites and databases for game information for Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) and Crawford

(2012) examines how gaming culture encompasses games *and* news sites, Frequently Asked Question (FAQ) pages, blogs, YouTube videos, and so on. Thus the field site requires careful consideration. Secondly, the different modes of interaction that are possible within these spaces, whether it includes interaction between avatars in the game, chat, and forum messages, mean that different ways of representing the space also need to be considered, including both written and visual. In the previous chapter, the idea of low bandwidth (O'Brien, 2001) was highlighted to denote how text-based sites offer fewer opportunities for enacting identity because the user is limited to text. In comparison, this study comprises low and high bandwidth sites, namely forums (low) and the game (high). In turn, this affects how such a space can be researched, and a host of avenues can potentially be explored in this area.

Pink (2012) puts forward the idea that online research need not involve looking for new social research methods, but refashioning existing methods can be adequate. She gives the example of using online research to further her study of "slow cities" by looking at their online presence, such as YouTube videos of the town and its inhabitants (Pink, 2012). Yet, in a study of online spaces, where the nature of information can be either visual or textual, and where different types of recording are possible, this approach may be insufficient (Garcia et al., 2009). This thesis therefore makes a contribution to the growing methodological literature concerning online research methods, by extending existing methods to newer digital terrain, but in a way that is sensitive to alternate ways of co-producing data with respondents in online spaces.

The chapter is broken down into the following sections, which reflect the organisation of the fieldwork upon which this thesis draws. Firstly, the definition of online ethnography is discussed, in terms of its relationship to offline ethnography,

and exploring how it can be achieved. This definition is also examined as part of the study's poststructuralist epistemological viewpoint. Secondly, the research design is outlined, starting with the process of participant observation, in the context of being an insider playing the game, and how this process helped to define the field site. Online asynchronous interviewing is explored as a method, and the potential for image elicitation to be used such interviews. The forum observation phase is discussed in-depth and how it contributed to the ethnography. Thirdly, the coding of textual data is detailed, combining data from all phases of the research process. Finally, the ethics of each part of the research is scrutinised.

4.1 Defining Online Ethnography

This study is ethnographic in its approach, using a range of qualitative methods to co-construct data with respondents in interviews, and from observations of connected online spaces, namely Final Fantasy XIV and its official forum. Ethnography has become a core part of sociological research (Atkinson et al., 2003), with certain key features. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) hold that its main aspects include the study of a group within its everyday setting, relatively open-ended data collection during an extended period of time in the field, and the use of qualitative methods, such as interviews and participant observation. Nonetheless, these established ideas about ethnography revolve around *physical* immersion in a bounded location for a period of time while conducting participant observation (Delamont, 2002), which cannot necessarily be achieved in the same fashion online.

Ethnography is a contested practice, where disputes around the type of knowledge that can be generated through ethnographic enquiry remain vivid. Different approaches to ethnography have been charted (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005;

Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), and these are now briefly examined. Ethnography in the early twentieth century was dominated by positivist views that emphasised scientific attitudes to social research, where "objective" accounts of social life could be achieved (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). In this fashion, it was believed that laws could be generated explaining social life (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Positivism went into decline as naturalism became a more dominant view, which places greater emphasis on studying social life in its "natural" state to describe what occurs and how people talk about their actions (ibid.). This perspective emphasises an ethnographer visiting a location to study a group in situ. However, naturalism's claims to neutral observation have been criticised for remaining close to scientific claims about knowledge and ignores the politics of research (ibid.). In this case, the values of naturalism seem at odds with studying online communities (Hine, 2000).

The previous chapter examined the popular view of the internet as disembodied and lacking co-presence (Shilling, 2005), which could lead some to argue that ethnography cannot be achieved in online spaces, if working from a naturalistic perspective (Hine, 2000). Hammersley (2006) suggests that the problem lies in the honesty of online respondents: "…we do not know who the writers of the online contributions are, what their purposes were, what their circumstances are, etc. *beyond what they tell us*," (italics in original, p.8). However, he notes that this problem is not unique to online ethnography and has wider repercussions. Juxtaposed to naturalism is the interpretivist view, which recognises how social actors give social and cultural meanings to situations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This approach draws on the critique offered by Clifford and Marcus (1986), whose collection problematised the notion of authoritative representation through ethnography. Clifford (1986) points to how "[e]thnographic truths are thus inherently

partial – committed and incomplete," (italics in original, p.7). Consequently, there are limits to what can be represented in ethnography, and alongside feminist ethnography, drew attention to how the background of the researcher can influence research (Clifford, 1986). Moreover, a reflexive aspect, where the researcher details her own background in the account, is paramount.

This study adopts a poststructuralist epistemological approach to ethnography, which ties into the work of Butler (1990; 1993; 2004) examined in the previous chapter. Clifford (1986) pointed to how poststructuralism, postmodernism and feminism challenged the notion of ethnographic writing as authoritative, emphasising instead that ethnography results in a constructed text. This entails a critical focus on how ethnographic research is conducted in a reflexive fashion. I argue from a poststructuralist perspective that online research in itself is unstable owing to the passage of time and the transient nature of online spaces. While I hope to convey in the analysis chapters partly how Final Fantasy XIV is a meaningful site of social interaction, this study is framed as a partial account of a community that was stable inasmuch as many of its members, including many of my interview respondents, had participated in Final Fantasy online games for up to eight years. Yet, aspects of the game (and other online games) and the modes of communication available to players change all the time. Both the game design and the methods of communication affect how performative identity can be enacted in Final Fantasy XIV and its related spaces, along with a series of norms, including those relating to gender, sexuality and race/'race'. Conducting research on this topic is mediated through the same technological constraints that limit identity, namely the affordances of the game design and the depth of communication possible. The remainder of this section sets

out how the core facets of ethnography are still viable online, as well as reflecting on the particular challenges posed by conducting an online ethnography.

Hine (2000) summarises what makes ethnographic accounts seem authoritative: travel to a field site; experience of the field site; and sustained interaction with respondents. She then explores how online ethnography can be formulated. Though it does not require physical travel, it still necessitates "experiential displacement", where the researcher experiences a form of travel through computer-mediated environments, such as forums or games, and become acquainted with the values of the space in question (Hine, 2000: 45). Moreover, Hine (2000) argues that online research "destabilises the ethnographic reliance on sustained presence in a found field site," (p.43). In her view, this is the main reason that naturalist and realist approaches to ethnography would reject online ethnography, and echoes the concerns posed by Hammersley (2006) about only "knowing" respondents through their textual claims. This also relates to the problems identified in the previous chapter in relation to embodiment and internet use, which also have methodological repercussions for this study. The previous chapter outlined the theoretical approaches to the embodied avatar. In particular, Grosz's (1994) work was discussed in terms of the philosophical emphasis on mind over body, which remains a feature of discourses around the internet, where the mind ventures forth through the screen. However, Markham (2005) points out that social science methods privilege the body over the mind, such as the embodied presence of the ethnographer or interviewer. Online research still relies on social research methods that are based on co-presence between researcher and respondents and may seem less credible without an offline meeting with respondents (ibid.).

Presence can also be achieved online in different ways, rather than just via the researcher's embodiment, such as on forums. Orgad (2009) also notes that forum users' participation changes over time, where their presence cannot always be felt through text, making them a "lurker", which is the name for someone who visits a forum to read posts, but does not contribute. Most forum users start off in this fashion, observing how a forum works and the tone of the conversation, before transitioning to taking part by writing posts (Orgad, 2009). Similarly, Hine (2008) suggests that an online ethnography of a forum necessitates regular visits to the forum to experience how discussions unfold, and where appropriate, participate by writing posts. In the same way, the online ethnographer's presence is not necessarily associated with visibility in the same way as with offline ethnography, but depends on the online space being researched.

The problem posed by the notion of embodied presence also has its roots in the debates around representation and knowledge. If we consider that ethnographic knowledge is partial (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), whether offline or online, then there seems to be little sense in privileging offline ways of understanding and researching respondents' lives over online methods – one does not necessarily "know" the respondent better through an offline, embodied meeting (Markham, 2005). Hine (2000) also evokes the need to understand an online social space as informants do. By judging how respondents view each other as "real" or "honest", the researcher needs to accept "that 'the informant' is a partial performance rather than a whole identity," (Hine, 2000: 49), which I argue applies to both online and offline ethnography. This also taps into the poststructuralist notion of identity, which emphasises that identity is not static, rather in process and produced in relation to discourse and social norms (Butler, 1990). The performative identity enacted in

relation to the avatar, or on the forum, is partly the result of the normative structure within the online spaces in question.

Online ethnography also needs to clearly define the field site, which may be less straightforward. Above, it was noted that ethnography requires time spent in a particular bounded location while undertaking the study (Hine, 2000). In offline ethnography, one must still decide on the field site, which tends to be driven more by a particular location, such as a school, or an interesting group (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Further negotiation may be needed after starting fieldwork to further refine the field site, such as access to a particular class (Delamont, 2002). With online ethnography, the field site is less bounded by a geographical location, though certain examples exist, such as Silver's (2000) study of internet use in Blacksburg, Virginia, where Virginia Tech and the local authorities both contributed to infrastructure improvements to bring the city online at a much faster rate than elsewhere. Baym (2009) notes a tendency for online social research to focus on a single space, even though an online community may meet in multiple spaces online. Such focus suggests a tendency to follow ethnographic ideas about place, where a study is often grounded geographically (Hine, 2000). Another approach can be identified, through the recognition of the researcher's involvement in co-constructing the field site through engagement with respondents and the community being studied.

Boellstorff (2009) makes the claim that online ethnography involves creating a field site by reflexively engaging with respondents within a community and through participant observation. Markham (2005) also points to the need for online research to actively map a field site, which does not exist prior to (or outside of) the research process. This entails the researcher paying attention to her own actions, such as the

search terms and search engines used to find the site, as well as examining how respondents construct boundaries in field sites (Markham, 2005). As a result, online ethnography involves an active participation in bounding the field site. Above, it was noted that much online research still focuses on a single website (Baym, 2009), yet most ethnographic accounts of online games and worlds concern multiple, linked spaces. Taylor (2006) refers to EverQuest and related websites for guilds, databases, and forums for example, noting the "distributed social sphere" (p.51) around gaming, as players extend the social space of the game. Pearce and Artemesia (2009) followed the Uru group around different online worlds, such as There.com and Second Life, as well as other websites used by the group. In researching Final Fantasy XIV, I decided to include not just the game itself, but also forums where players talked, as well as using other sites myself to gain information about the game, such as databases, YouTube videos and blogs. To this end, it is important to have a broad conception of online field sites, especially with online gaming, to gain a broader insight into the social interaction between players.

Participation in an online game also requires play, which raises questions around the idea of play as a method related to ethnographic research. Game studies privileges the direct involvement of a researcher in a game to experience it directly (Aarseth, 2006) as discussed in chapter two, which echoes ethnographic participant observation, and I argue renders games viable ethnographic research sites. Yet, such research does not always discuss the author's play, and often focuses on others' play, such as respondents' play (e.g. Thornham, 2011), or focuses on an aspect of the game, for example narrative (e.g. Bertozzi, 2012). Boellstorff et al. (2012) also point out that the direct participation of the researcher differentiates ethnography of online games and worlds from many forms of offline ethnography, where the researcher is

not necessarily expected to have the same levels of skill or expertise as those being studied. They give the example of studying surgeons in an operating theatre – the ethnographer is expected to be present, but not scrub up to join in with the operation.

Pearce and Artemesia (2009) also note the importance of play in researching such spaces, and how the study of play also has links to performance ethnography. This type of ethnography is associated with anthropological studies of performance and ritual, such as the work of Victor Turner (1982) on ritual as a liminal space, that is, a space outside the everyday. Denzin (2003) puts forward another iteration where ethnographic texts are performed theatrically. Pearce and Artemesia (2009) propose another, where (game) play takes place in a liminal space and that the researcher must become part of the performance of play. Their study focuses on "the emergence of individual and group identity through the performance and practice of play," (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009: 59), which necessitated their direct engagement through play to reflect their respondents' practices. They also consider how play is perceived to be unproductive in Euro-American society, which led their respondents to emphasise that the social group mattered more than the games or worlds they were part of, though Pearce and Artemesia (2009) do not discuss how this view can also affect fieldwork.

Boellstorff (2008) notes briefly how participant observation can make it seem as if the research intersects with "fun and games" (p.71). He compares this with his experience of fieldwork in Indonesia, spending time watching films with respondents in the evening. In my experience, the play aspect of fieldwork probably looked fun on the surface, but could be more work-like at times. I deliberately chose a new MMORPG to keep a degree of distance and unfamiliarity, however the early period of the game was dogged with disconnection problems and server downtime, leading

to frustration as I sat twiddling my thumbs waiting for the game to come back online. Taylor (2006) notes how online gaming can look much more like work than other types of gaming, with frequent bouts of boredom and repetition needed to progress. This view is summed up by the so-called "power" gamers she studied, who approach MMORPGs in a goal-oriented, efficient manner. They often spend time deliberating on strategies to progress in the game as quickly as possible. In Final Fantasy XIV, this could be seen through the growth of so-called "raptor parties". "Hardcore" players found that the best way to level up the avatar to make it more powerful, where the avatar gains experience points (XP) by defeating monsters, was to gather in groups of six to fight a particular monster called a raptor over and over again as the effort/reward ratio enabled them to make progress quickly. Such an approach is often called "grinding" because of the repetition involved over a long period of time. In my fieldwork notes and in interviews, boredom was a recurring theme as there was little to do at times in the game.

My own time spent in the game was lengthy in the participant observation phase, amounting to playing four or five times per week for periods of around three hours. This was also supplemented with frequent visits to forums and databases to find out how to progress in the game, often while playing the game and switching between windows. In the case of an ethnographic researcher, play can indeed be productive - generating data about the game, mapping the field site by researching related online spaces, and proving insider status, which is discussed in more detail later in the chapter. I would thus argue that 'play' itself is another contested practice in this study, as part method for participant observation, and part contradiction where play becomes work, for researcher, as well as players.

Another facet of ethnography is the time spent in the field, with emphasis on the length of time spent among a group (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Researchers have observed how the internet can distort time in some ways (Karpf, 2012), comparing a year online to dog years, which symbolises one year of a human life comprising seven of a dog. Karpf (2012) notes how the pace of change online can make this seem to be the case, such as how different modes of communication seem to rise and fall from favour rather quickly, such as forms of social media, which do not always have a long lifespan. Others have pointed to how trust and rapport can be formed much more quickly online (O'Connor et al., 2008), and that relationships between users can develop at a faster pace (Boellstorff, 2008). This may be partly due to the feeling of disinhibition that internet users evoke, where users can disclose more personal matters more easily where they cannot see the reactions of others (Suler, 2004; Joinson, 2005). Yet, the pace of technological change has always been relatively fast online. Baym and Markham (2009) hold that online research often chases the new or novel, and dehistoricises technology and social research methods by ignoring (or devaluing) previous research. This section has sought to locate online ethnography within the history of ethnography by arguing that many core features of ethnography can certainly be retained or refashioned, however one departure remains: the time taken to conduct a study. The notion of "internet time" evokes how online ethnographic research can be conducted much more quickly, where the fieldwork for this study amounted to 11 months. Some may argue that this is inadequate for an ethnographic study, however internet research can be conducted in a much more intensive manner. This point is revisited in the section concerning the interviews, since it took only two months to complete 36 asynchronous online interviews. The following section now turns to the use of participant observation,

which is a core method of ethnography, in playing Final Fantasy XIV, and the notion of insider research.

4.2 Participant Observation and Insider Status

In conducting this study, I sought to make the most of my insider status as a gamer. The issue of researching as an outsider or insider is well-documented in social research, with pros and cons to each approach. Outsiders to a research milieu may be better able to create research that yields different insights in an area new to them. Though insiders gain access to a research site more easily, due to pre-existing ties, if one is too close to the researched area, important points may be missed due to over-familiarity (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Hodkinson (2005) examines the issue around insider/outsider research in youth subcultures, and attempts to move beyond separating insider and outsider in a binary fashion. He situates his own position within his study of goths as an "insider researcher" (ibid.: 136), recognising both his status as a goth, as well as a researcher. One of the risks he evokes in such a study is that of "insider complacency" (ibid.: 139) around the idea of relationships with respondents and rapport being automatic, as well as how insider status does not always benefit the research, especially where the researcher is too close to the culture. In this case, it seemed important to be an insider. Gamers can be hostile to researchers, who are sometimes perceived as portraying gamers in a negative light, for example the media effects research discussed in the literature review (Peters and Malesky, 2008). Many articles about gaming as a subculture show a lack of familiarity with games, with little willingness to approach games from a gamer's perspective (Newman, 2004), or ignore the wider fan culture of gaming (Crawford, 2012).

When conducting my own study, players approved of my history of playing games and were quite damning of research that they felt distorted the player experience of gaming. Many of them however assumed I had played Final Fantasy XI, the previous online version of Final Fantasy, when I had not. While I had played many of the other entries in the series, which definitely helped in terms of terminology, and the series' history and culture, at times it was awkward when they switched between discussing one game, then the other almost interchangeably, which is highlighted in the analysis chapters. Nonetheless, my experience of gaming made it easier to find definitions of terms and synopses of events in Final Fantasy XI to figure out their comments.

In relation to the research design, many studies of online games look at the guild level. Where researchers are already guild members, it forms an easier point of access. Guilds, or in Final Fantasy XIV Linkshells, are established groups in games, organised by players with particular goals in mind. Some are formed by existing friendship groups, or may depend on the way in which a group enjoys playing, e.g. casually working through the game, or aiming to conquer the game as quickly as possible. In Sundén and Sveningsson's (2012) study, Sveningsson studied a guild that she had been a member for a period of time before commencing the research, as did Golub (2010), Nardi (2010), Taylor (2006), Consalvo (2007), and Valkyrie (2011). In this regard, insider status reaps its rewards, though it limits the possibilities to guilds and their activities, and involving respondents the researcher already knows. In my own study, many Linkshells underwent upheavals as players left, leading to periods of fragmentation. Studying a Linkshell could have enabled the study of a smaller group within the game to examine the research questions in relation to a much more defined group of players. Yet, my interest in the norms

pervading the game and its related spaces also suggested looking at the game more broadly, rather than focusing on a limited Linkshell, in addition to how few studies include forums. To this end, the game space is the primary field site for participant observation, which extends outwards in the shape of the fan forums used for interviews and the official forum, hosted on the game's official website.

With Final Fantasy XIV, previous experience of gaming proved to be a vital asset, given its difficulty. One of the most significant problems with the game in its early stages was that it lacked information regarding how to play. I frequently needed to consult fan forums to find out how to accomplish quite basic actions. As a result, I believe that a non-gamer would have stopped researching this particular game. However, on a more positive note, it enabled me to see how visiting related sites is important when playing a game, confirming Golub's (2010) insight that a game should not be studied in isolation. At the same time, this period made me realise that I was also an outsider, partly as a researcher, but also because I did not share certain gaming experiences, as discussed above. The initial experience of play was important to establish myself as a competent player and to identify the field site boundaries.

I thus initially used two avatars, later adding another, to experience the game, as well as to see some of the busier servers in action. The first was Rill Farstrider, a Seeker of the Sun Miqo'te, on the server Cornelia[13]:

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[13] Final Fantasy XIV servers were named after towns and cities in previous Final Fantasy titles.

Figure 12 My Miqo'te avatar Rill

The second was also called Rill Farstrider, since the name seemed androgynous and both could easily be remembered by my respondents, and was a Sea Wolf Roegadyn on the Lindblum server, created two months after the original Rill.

Figure 13 My Roegadyn avatar Rill

The third was Ferdy Farstrider, a Dunesfolk Lalafell on the Besaid server. He was created in May 2011, to experience how the early stages of the game had been changed by the development team, and to observe a different server. The first name was altered as it seemed to suit him better, but retained the same surname to maintain a connection.

Figure 14 My Lalafell avatar Ferdy

Extensive fieldnotes were kept with observations about the game itself, the forums, and tentative themes that I wanted to address in the interviews. This period was also useful for further refining the aims of the research, in the context of the game, as well as the research questions that I sought to answer.

To position myself as an insider researcher, and to establish an easy way for respondents to find out more about the research, I used an eportfolio on the University of Warwick Sociology Department website[14]. This blends both academic

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[14] http://go.warwick.ac.uk/emmahutchinson

aspects, such as research interests, project aims, and contact details, with information about my Final Fantasy XIV avatars in the form of "signatures" and Xbox Live gamertag, which has a small cartoon picture of me. In gaming forums, signatures and gamertags are commonly used to signify one's status as a gamer (Taylor, 2006), and the image is perceived as a version of the player herself. They could thus see that I live in the UK, and am affiliated with a particular university, and see what type of games I play on a regular basis. In the course of the interviews, talking about the games we had played in the past became an icebreaker, comparing notes about different series and so on. One of my signatures is featured below.

Figure 15 Signature for my Miqo'te avatar

This signature features a small picture of the avatar, the statistics of her highest rated classes (from left to right Gladiator, Conjurer, Pugilist, Blacksmith, Marauder and Goldsmith), and the server she is on currently (Cornelia). In this way, potential respondents could quickly surmise how much time I had spent playing the game. The Xbox Live gamertag works in a similar fashion, but displays the Xbox 360 games I have played most recently, which seemed a good way of also proving my other gaming credentials. The eportfolio was also designed to assist further in acquiring informed consent for the interviews, by stating my research aims in a clear fashion.

4.3 Online Asynchronous Interviews

Another important dimension of my fieldwork was online interviews. Having identified three fan forums during the participant observation phase, I contacted the administrators[15] regarding the possibility of conducting interviews with some of their users. In the message, I gave details of my research aims, and a little information about myself such as my status as a gamer and research student, as well as a link to my eportfolio for more information. A copy of this message can be found in Appendix I. One website never replied to my message, but the other two were keen on the idea. The first to reply was Eorzeapedia.com[16], a fan-run wiki site devoted to finding and displaying information about the game. This has since been taken over by the company gamerescape.com[17]. Many forums for video games are part of larger companies, which run multiple websites for gaming. This also includes the second to reply, namely the Final Fantasy XIV forum in the ZAM network. Gradually, ZAM has become one of the biggest websites for online gaming, including all of the biggest online games in North America and Europe. ZAM also has a strict policy in place for researchers seeking to talk to its users, stating that only university-affiliated researchers can conduct studies on their forums, and all questions must be checked by administrators to ensure that they do not pose a security risk, such as requesting passwords or financial details. I decided that it would be advisable to test my questions on the smaller Eorzeapedia site as they had a smaller number of visitors to the forum than the ZAM site, though many of them were loyal to the site as it had run a similar version for the game Final Fantasy XI.

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[15]Administrators, also referred to as moderators, are normally volunteers drawn from existing members of a forum and manage different elements of running the site, such as maintaining servers, and keeping order in the forum.

[16] Eorzea is the name of the continent in the game, so it is designed to be a play on words with encyclopaedia.

[17] http://ffxiv.gamerescape.com/ is its current address.

Overall, I underestimated the number of respondents. Other online researchers suggest that a form of incentive is required to encourage people to take part in such interviews (Sanders, 2005). However, I could not offer anything to encourage participants, and anticipated having few respondents. In the first wave, 15 volunteered, though only 12 participated fully. The moderators assisted in placing the thread requesting volunteers, as well as offering to post in the thread to confirm that I had sought their permission. The opening message of the thread was in a similar vein to the original request sent to the moderators, outlining a little about myself professionally and the aims of the research. The thread generated some debate, with many users offering their opinions without a full interview, which was encouraging. Additionally, some of the volunteers came forward in this thread, whereas others contacted me through private messaging on the forum[18] or emails. I asked about their preferred mode of contact, suggesting MSN messenger, Skype, email or private messaging. Most opted for email or private messaging, though one was conducted via Internet Relay Chat (IRC), which is a form of instant messaging chat. Some implied that such email or private message contact was more private, and easier to fit in around their other family and work commitments compared to Skype, as well as the time difference since most of the respondents were from North America.

The next wave of interviews was conducted in the first two weeks of February 2011. I further refined the questions following the Eorzeapedia interviews, which the ZAM forum moderators were happy with. They were also helpful in identifying the best section for my thread, and again posted in the thread confirming that I had negotiated access with them. In this instance, 23 interviews were conducted using asynchronous

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[18] Most forums offer a type of private messaging, which is between individual users, and functions much like email.

communication, as most seemed to prefer this mode of contact for similar reasons to the first. One further interview was elicited in late February, from a friend of one of the Eorzeapedia respondents, who contacted me separately. A copy of the interview schedule can be found in Appendix II.

It should be noted that two users mentioned that they were pleased I had contacted the moderators prior to starting my thread. Apparently, there had been instances of a student or researcher placing a survey invite, or request for interviews without asking permission, or only stating one sentence, such as "Please take my survey". I believe that this stage of the fieldwork was more successful because of my actions and the care that I took in writing the request, which suggested that the research design and practice were both successful. However, the result was that the sampling was mostly based on convenience, and membership of the two forums. The interviews are necessarily restricted to players who actually go on these particular forums, and will have missed those who do not. However, the demographics of the sample do appear to match demographic data gleaned in studies of other online games, such as Williams et al. (2008).

As a minimum, I asked that the respondents offer their age, sex and location, since this is a common request online (O'Connor et al., 2008), though many offered more detail. The following table contains their responses to these specific questions.

Table 1 Participant Attributes

Participant attribute	
Age	19-40, average 28
Location	26 America
	3 Netherlands
	2 UK
	2 Canada
	1 Bahrain
	1 Puerto Rico
	1 Australia
Player sex	7 female
	28 male
	1 gender dysphoric
Avatar sex	17 male
	19 female
Number who mentioned having children	4
Sexuality (if mentioned)	17 heterosexual
	1 homosexual
	1 bisexual
Relationship status (if mentioned)	14 in relationships; 4 single

Interestingly, I did not explicitly ask about work, yet many of them offered their current position, or the few who had recently been made unemployed offered their most recent job. Seven were students, and professionals were also well represented, with two teachers, a technical writer, an e-marketing entrepreneur, and a network administrator (as well as others in the IT industry). Two were currently serving in the

US army, one of whom was deployed abroad, and whose interview thus came to an abrupt end. Two more described themselves as "medically disabled", though one of these was also a student at his local college.

Interviewing online takes two forms: asynchronously, which is predominantly over email and the interviewer and interviewee offer their replies at different times, or synchronously via chat taking place in real-time. Asynchronous interviews have gained popularity due to their technical ease, and their potential to generate reflexive discussions (James and Busher, 2006). Respondents are given plenty of time to consider their responses, though it can encourage respondents to linger on a reply, in contrast to quick-fire answers in synchronous interviews (ibid.). Nevertheless, given the thesis' focus on performative identity, it seemed efficacious to allow respondents time to consider their emails. The issue of time in these interviews is important in other ways too. Online interviewing is often characterised as a lengthy way to conduct interviews (ibid.). Both Orgad (2005) and Kivits (2004) spent months conducting interviews, with the majority of their respondents replying once a week or less often. James and Busher (2006) found respondents enjoyed spending time to reflect on their replies, but the interviews started to take longer than anticipated. With some, they seemed to lose the thread of the conversation as too much time had passed since the start of the interview (ibid.).

Asynchronous methods are especially useful when the researcher and respondent are a long way from each other and the questions benefit from reflection on the part of the respondent (ibid.). However, it has been suggested that rapport can be harder to maintain in such interviews (Bryman, 2008). Yet, this claim needs considerable unpacking. James and Busher (2006) still found asynchronous interviews with people they already knew difficult. Some respondents became disengaged if the

researchers took longer to reply. Orgad (2005) also mentions the need to reply quickly to respondents to appear interested in what they are saying. Though such interviews are framed as asynchronous, these researchers still maintain that time is a luxury only afforded to the respondent, while the researcher must reply quickly.

Yet, it has equally been suggested that such concern about rapport may unwarranted. In some instances, the internet allows for a greater level of directness, for example the ease with which people can ask age, sex and location (abbreviated to 'asl') (O'Connor et al., 2008). Joinson (2001) has suggested that the lack of facial cues and the feeling of anonymity encourage greater levels of disclosure in interviews. The emphasis here is that the respondent cannot see the face of the interviewer and her reactions to what is being said. Suler (2004) frames this in terms of a disinhibition effect, which can have two outcomes. The first is benign, where people become more willing to express positive emotions and perform acts of kindness; the second is toxic, where people are ruder (or become "trolls") and may access sites such as pornography, which they may avoid in everyday life. He believes that users find it easier to compartmentalise the internet as separate to "real" life, and text-based environments, such as forums, can leave the author feeling invisible in some respects. All of these ideas suggest that creating rapport in the absence of face-to-face interaction should not be so much of a problem, provided the researcher does not necessarily expect to follow more conventional ideas. Rapport may thus take a different form online. The interviewer needs to be relatively open about her aims for example, partly for informed consent, but also to establish rapport. Orgad (2009) goes as far as saying that concerns about computer-mediated communication stem from fears around disembodiment, which leads us back to the issues raised in the previous chapter. Computer-mediated communication is still posited as "a

constrained version of face-to-face embodied interaction," (Orgad, 2009: 48), which leads to the concern about alleged anonymity of respondents and data validity questions.

In some regards, the speed with which the interviews took place surprised me – all 36 were completed within two months. The pace of time online was discussed earlier in relation to ethnography, but is also important here. Bryman (2008) for example states that trust is important online for research and must be built up gradually. Though the transfer of offline techniques is sometimes favoured with regard to online research, especially with interviews (Williams, 2007), the considerations of phenomena such as "internet time" (Karpf, 2012) and the speeding up of communication must also be taken into account. Trust is certainly important to build up with respondents, and openness can also be a good way to do so, but the speed at which such communication can be achieved means that researchers need to respond in a timely fashion to emails for interviews for example. During my study, I tried to reply to each respondent once per day, or in some instances twice if other interviews were tailing off, though respondents replied at different speeds. For example, some of the respondents were unemployed, disabled, or students, and had more time to reply more frequently than the others. I also had to take the length of my own replies into consideration after an incident in the first group of interviews. When I started to write shorter messages due to the volume of messages I was receiving, one respondent noticed the change in the length of my replies, and stated that I did not need to reply quite so quickly as he would rather have a more considered reply from me, especially if the other interviews were taking up a lot of time. This also suggested that it was insufficient to just reply quickly to respondents, but they would

also be attuned to other factors in the absence of facial cues, which could lead them to interpret my level of interest.

Online game players could be characterised as so-called digital natives. The term is applied to young people, and those in their twenties, who have grown up with the internet and computers (Bryman, 2008). With regards to my respondents, the majority had played online games for an average of seven years. Consequently, they must have had an internet connection for a long time and were thus very comfortable with communicating online. Most mentioned maintaining relationships with online friends through playing games together for many years, for example. These respondents were thus prime candidates for online interviews, due to their familiarity with different modes of online communication. This can also partly account for the speedy pace of the interviews.

Transcription and coding started very early on. Unlike face-to-face interviews, much less time was needed to transcribe the interviews – the only task was to copy the interviews and paste them in Word documents, which could then be more easily imported in NVivo. Due to the computerised nature of the interviews, I decided early on to use NVivo to code the data and I was thus able to start coding between the two waves of interviews in fact. By starting coding at such an early phase, analysis could begin very early on in the process. The coding and analysis process is examined in more depth later. In the analysis chapters, quotations from interviews are included verbatim.

As discussed in the previous chapter regarding the relationship between embodiment and identity, the interview questions concerned the process of avatar creation. The argument was put forward that avatar creation is a deliberate performative act taking

place within a framework of intelligibility. Throughout the period of play, the relationship between the player and avatar is important in terms of identity performance and social interaction (Taylor, 2006; Boellstorff, 2008; Shapiro, 2010). Players spend a considerable amount of time planning their avatar, as it affects how they are perceived by others – one respondent explained how he actually spent a week discussing his decisions with his partner. A few had been involved in early testing of the game and had gradually refined their avatar over the course of several months[19]. Gender and race/'race' remain important online, and to answer the research question concerning online identity, the meanings that players attach to them need to be teased out. Moreover, issues and stereotypes around gender for example, such as the notion of men switching gender with their avatar, are often debated on forums.

Another method employed in the interviews was using screenshots, as a form of image elicitation. The methods literature seems to emphasise the difficulty of creating rapport with interviewees that the researcher has never met in a face-to-face capacity (Bryman, 2008). James and Busher (2006) conducted email interviews with former colleagues and students, but still struggled to keep the conversation going at times. Unlike an online interview which is conducted via chat, where both parties reply in a more naturalistic fashion, asynchronous interviews can result in a delay between a question being asked, and receiving a reply. In some respects, this alters the feel of the interview, and can seem to disrupt the flow of conversation. Sometimes, a question was misunderstood, which could have been quickly resolved

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[19] Online games undergo considerable testing before release, but will normally be tested by players who volunteer to ensure maximum compatibility between types of computers. These are divided into alpha and beta phases, and the few who had participated were proud to have done so, since only 1,000 had been permitted for each round. At the end of the test, all avatars are erased, but two respondents used the opportunity to experiment at this stage.

in many other interview settings, but with an asynchronous interview, it took a little while to rectify, for example. To encourage rapport, and to create a talking point with respondents, I asked them for a screenshot of their avatar. Boellstorff et al. (2012) point to the ease of taking screenshots during online fieldwork. Screenshots are pictures taken in game using either the "print screen" key found on most keyboards, or using specialist software such as Fraps. Players regularly posted screenshots of their activities to the forums, most of which have threads dedicated to interesting or funny screenshots. I also took nearly 700 screenshots myself – some for analysis, as well as some memos for research diary entries. In some instances, players would also post them on forums to demonstrate a point. Most of the respondents I interviewed had at least a few, with some having online photo albums to record their adventures in the game.

Photo elicitation interviews consist of presenting the respondent with a series of photographs, which are linked to an interview schedule (Pink, 2007). One frequent example of photo elicitation is the life history interview (Hirsch, 1999). The interviewer asks the respondent to show a selection of photos that represent different aspects of their life, and explain to the interviewer what is happening. Photos tend to trigger memories in a way that words do not (Banks, 2001). The main point is that the respondent must have a personal connection to the photo (though it need not be their own personal one), for the process to work (Harper, 2002). Pink (2007) used photos of bullfighting to discuss the sport with Spanish fans, who did not participate directly, but were invested in the sport as spectators and knowledgeable fans. At this point, it could be argued that the relationship between the player and the avatar is such, that screenshots of the avatar carry the same meaning to the player as if they were presented with a photo of themselves or something they hold as deeply

important to them. Video games are broadly premised on the player identifying with the avatar to immerse themselves in them (Giddings, 2007), which is achieved by interacting with the game space. This can be observed through players' talk concerning a game – most tend to alternate between 'I' and 'him/her'/'he/she' in the course of talking about a game. Giddings' (2007) study of his sons playing a Lego racing game led one of them to comment "I'm the one who makes the Lego Racers go" for example (p.46). Rather than identifying as the person driving the car, he recognised himself as the agent acting on the Lego figure behind the wheel to propel them around the track. The shift in speech may thus occur when switching between one's own role in the game, and something attributed to the avatar. In social terms, the avatar is deemed an extension of the player into the space, as well as a social representative, as discussed in the previous chapter.

The internet offers also alternative means of representing oneself online. Hum et al. (2011) examined the different types of Facebook profile pictures, which serve as the main picture to represent the user to others. They noted how users did not always just use pictures of themselves – sometimes group photos were used. This suggests that image elicitation could involve a wider range of images taken to represent the respondent than previously used. Considering Facebook's claim that 300 million photos are uploaded daily to the site (Ambrust, 2012), there is also a much broader scope for using social networking sites in photo elicitation.

I asked interviewees if they could send a picture of their avatar to start. Most sent at least one screenshot, often with the avatar facing forwards, like a typical portrait style picture. A handful also sent further screenshots to illustrate their points. One respondent discussed how he likes his avatar to be well-dressed as he always takes care over his offline personal appearance. He then sent a screenshot of his avatar

wearing a matching outfit to emphasise this point, which was actually from his Facebook page. Another used a screenshot to explain how fellow players sometimes commented that his avatar looked scary, particularly at night when the avatar's eyes seemed especially piercing. I similarly shared some of my own screenshots to illustrate certain points, such as when I wanted to talk about avatar appearance. Clothing for avatars is a hot topic among players, including its practicality when fighting, or just the aesthetic appeal (Taylor, 2006). Some of my respondents mentioned that appearance gave them cues about the player, with a female avatar wearing certain skimpy outfits signalling a self-defined male player. I think overall using screenshots in this fashion certainly prompted discussions with respondents, and in some instances helped to clarify my points, as well as theirs. However, such image elicitation has not been used in online interviews to the best of my knowledge, though many studies of the sharing and dissemination of photographs online have now been established. This represents an original methodological contribution in the development of online social research methods.

Screenshots are also used as a form of data in themselves. It is important partly to illustrate the analytical chapters for anyone who is unfamiliar with the game, or gaming more broadly, but also can be used for analytical purposes. For example, it is interesting how players interact socially in games using the avatar as a social representative of the player. In interviews, my respondents described how they would talk to other avatars in the game as if it were the person. Penelo talked about her time in the game as a way of socialising with her friends who she had met online, but never in person. The potential for using screenshots in this fashion also links them to the observation data, as well as using the discussion points raised by interviewees during the image elicitation interviews. Pink (2007) points to how

photographs can be analysed and interpreted in different ways, ranging from the respondent's meanings, the researcher's interpretations and so on, which can even be shown in the way photographs are arranged in a collection, for example. Pink (2007) arranged a collection of bull-fighting photos in the order they were taken, while respondents re-arranged them in terms of how they looked and the content of the photos. Banks (2001) also highlights the need to place photographs in an analysis to provide "…a reading of the external narrative that goes beyond the visual text itself," (p.12).

Many studies of online games use screenshots in an illustrative fashion only, such as Taylor (2006) and Pearce and Artemesia (2009), without interpretation. In this study, screenshots were analysed by drawing on the research diary data, as well as the interviews. Approximately 700 were taken in the course of play over 11 months. I would often spend time at key gathering areas identified in play as busy spots, observing how avatars used the space. One example is at so-called Aetheryte camps, which were small bases in the wilderness, marked by enormous crystals, where players would meet to go and fight monsters, or to rest between battles.

Figure 16 My avatar Rill at an Aetheryte camp in La Noscea

Screenshots were a key means of documenting such behaviour alongside written notes of particular moments. As themes emerged in the interviews, particular screenshots were identified as appropriate. In relation to discussions about embodiment and social interaction, the potential is great for screenshots to reveal important details about avatars that would be difficult to explain in writing. Moreover, screenshots are also useful in the dissemination of research findings. I have included them in conference talks for example, to show what an online game looks like to the uninitiated, and for making particular points around the embodied nature of this online interaction. The introduction to each of the analysis chapters explains how screenshots are used in that chapter.

4.4 Observation of the Official Forum

Many researchers have examined forums as social spaces, such as Rheingold's (1994) study of one of the earliest message boards, to more recent studies such as Bryson (2004), Williams (2006), Hammersley and Treseder (2007) and Stommel (2008). Such communities are posited as attractive to being studied unobtrusively through "lurking" (Hine, 2008), for example hard-to-reach communities, such as the latter two studies that look at forums for sufferers of eating disorders. Kendall (2002) takes Clifford and Marcus (1986) as a starting point in her study of the MUD BlueSky. Where Clifford and Marcus (1986) placed an emphasis on ethnographic *writing*, Kendall (2002) posits that online *text-based* spaces can be a likely location for ethnographic fieldwork, which could also be extended to forums, such as the one studied here.

Few studies of online gaming include forums, for example, none of the ethnographic works discussed in the literature review include forums in their analysis. Taylor

(2006) considers the role of particular websites that convey knowledge about the online game in her study, but not actual forums. Nevertheless, forums for games can be important sites for players to meet and talk to each other (Williams, 2007). Thus, an important aspect of interaction between gamers remains untapped by studies of online gaming. The previous chapters have emphasised the importance of providing a social context for gaming. In chapter two, the social context of gaming and its culture was examined, then in chapter three, the observations of the previous chapter were more theoretically grounded. Moreover, the norms attached to particular aspects of the avatar are important for understanding the performance of identity in Final Fantasy XIV and its related spaces. In addition to asking players how they create an avatar, studying how players talk about aspects of the avatar and the game on the forum are vital for establishing a broader picture of the community. Consequently, the forum represents an important avenue of enquiry for examining the construction of identity online, and the constraints that shape the possibilities open to players.

In March 2011, my original plan had been to spend some time with a group known as a Linkshell. These are informal groups of friends and acquaintances who spend time together in the game. On 8th March 2011, an official forum was finally launched by the developer Square Enix. The above-mentioned forums are independent of the company that develops the game, but there had been nothing officially run by the developers. The forum was launched to enable greater levels of communication between the development team and the fans, following its poor reception in the gaming media, with the game's producer Naoki Yoshida regularly reading both the

Japanese and English language forums[20], though he only posts on the Japanese section. The forum proved popular with players very quickly, especially since they believed their thoughts on the game would influence the developers. Following the Tohoku Earthquake on 11th March 2011, the company decided within a day to take the game offline due to the power problems that were affecting Japan. As a result, there were practical considerations in deciding to examine the forum.

During the time when the servers were offline, the new forum became very popular, partly as a way for players to express their condolences about the disaster in Japan, and for players to talk about the future direction of the game. Initially I looked at the forum perhaps as a way of gaining more interviews, however it became apparent that this would not be possible. The forum has a strict policy preventing users from revealing their "true" identities. Users were constantly reminded that the forum is a public space, since it can be viewed without logging in. If a player mentioned where they were from, or went into too much detail about their life, a moderator would often interject and delete such material from their post. Moderators would also often post messages in threads reminding users to not reveal personal details. This meant that I was unable to reveal myself as a researcher, nor contact moderators separately in the way that I had done before as there was no email address for them. I suspected that without permission from a moderator, my request may be viewed with some suspicion by the other forum users, following my experience with the other forums where players approved of my contact with the administrators, but also that the moderators would probably remove my request as it would be revealing too much.

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[20] There are also French and German sections, but these appeared to be used much less. One thread in the German section was actually about how German players like to play such games to improve their English, which could explain this.

The problem of researching forums is the perception of privacy versus the actual level of privacy afforded by the site set-up. This issue will be returned to in fuller detail in the ethics section, however for now it is important to note that forums and blogs are often viewed as a space intended for a particular audience (Moinian, 2006). Unlike many forums, the official Final Fantasy XIV forum can be read in its entirety without a login, which is why the moderators kept reminding users that their posts could be read. In the section on ethnography, I noted the different ways that presence can be interpreted on a forum. Hine (2008) holds that studies of forums need the researcher to experience the forum as a full participant, rather than simply taking data. Orgad (2009) suggests however that "lurkers" are still participating whether their traces are visible or not, with "lurking" forming part of the trajectory of forum experience. Users may "lurk" for a while reading a forum only before directly entering discussions. By necessity, I had to be a "lurker" observer, but engaged with the forum by visiting it over the course of the day, on an almost daily basis, for nearly six months and looking over the most popular threads and on-going conversations. These issues will be addressed more fully in the later ethics section.

In order to get a feel for the forum, I read the majority of the threads posted in the first two weeks to see what players were discussing. After a while, it became apparent that so many threads were being posted, it was not possible to either keep up with them, nor would it have been practical to analyse all of them. I decided it would be best to focus on the longer threads, as well as regularly skimming others which would be the most useful for my study. The idea was to flesh out some of the meanings attributed to avatars and parts of their creation, such as online race and gender, following the themes of the interviews. Moreover, the data offered greater insight into the opinions and values held by the players.

I focused on a section called "General Discussion". The forum has 50 separate sections for each language area (Japanese, English, French and German), mostly concerned with specific elements of the game, such as different elements of battle, crafting and other activities. General Discussion was the most-viewed section during this time, and comprised a wide range of topics. I visited this section on a daily basis during the observation period and saved the most relevant threads. These were selected partly on the basis of popularity, in terms of page views and number of replies, which were listed next to the title of the thread, and how close the subject matter was to the research questions. Hundreds were saved locally on my computer, but only the most relevant 33 forum threads were included in the dataset. As with the interview material, the original texts are reproduced verbatim in the analysis chapters. I used the same coding in NVivo, and also found other themes in the forum threads for re-examination in relation to the interview transcripts. The coding process is examined in more depth in the following section.

4.5 Coding and Analysis

As mentioned in the section concerning interviews, coding began during the first phase of interviews, and became a continual process during fieldwork. All of the interviews were saved into Word files, then imported into NVivo for coding. Later, forum threads were imported in the same fashion, after being saved locally on my computer, then formatted in Word. Certain screenshots were also imported, tying specific pictures to particular interviews, for example screenshots sent by the interviewee. The speed with which coding can start is one of the benefits of conducting online research in this manner, as the interviews essentially transcribe themselves when conducted via email. Online research thus lends itself readily to using Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) for coding

purposes. CAQDAS is often associated with grounded theory methods of coding, where the researcher examines the data, building concepts until theoretical saturation is reached (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). However, Coffey et al. (1996) suggest that such software can be used to expose how analysis is not a linear process, but can demonstrate hypertextual links within data for example. Though research is expected to be written up into a narrative, the messy nature of much research, and the continuous nature of analysis needs to be recognised (Baym and Markham, 2009).

In this study, I had approached the interviews with a goal in mind – to talk about avatar creation, in order to examine performative identity and embodiment online. From the outset, the data co-produced with interview respondents framed the process behind their decisions in particular ways. Coding thus began with nodes that related to specific parts of avatar creation, which involves the selection of race, gender, class, appearance, name and server. Others were then added, such as embodiment, which linked several of the above, such as aspects of appearance, gender and race. In this way, links within the initial themes could be more easily exposed. After the addition of the forum material, more hierarchically organised nodes were added to existing nodes, for example race also related to choice of race in game, stereotypical notions attached to races, and the exclusion of offline 'race' from the game spaces. Forum material was also deliberately selected to complement the interview data and concerned threads that depicted the normative framework in which the enactment of performative identity takes place in Final Fantasy XIV and its related spaces. By using this approach, the links between different themes became more apparent. The remainder of this chapter concerns the ethics of the study.

4.6 Ethics Online

This discussion is divided into three sections, for each strand of the dataset. Ethics codes of professional bodies, such as those of the BSA and ESRC, tend to overly problematise online research. Both suggest that online research warrants close exploration of ethics, due to its relatively recent development. Orton-Johnson (2010) holds that online research is overly scrutinised in these ethics codes, with neither differentiating between the internet as a culture, or a methodological tool. By declaring that all research involving an online component warrants a full review of ethics also posits such research on the same terms as types of research "involving more than minimal risk" (ESRC, 2010: §1.2.3). This list includes research with vulnerable groups, covert research, or research which could endanger the researcher and/or respondents, as well as "[r]esearch involving respondents through the internet, in particular where visual images are used, and where sensitive issues are discussed," (ESRC, 2010: §1.2.3).

Orton-Johnson (2010) prefers the Association of Internet Researchers' (AoIR) code of ethics, which takes a more nuanced view of internet research. It encourages the researcher to consider different aspects of online cultures and how ethical frameworks vary between countries, which is important where online cultures can be international (AoIR, 2002). For example, the American perspective tends to consider the utilitarian approach of risk v cost and liability for the institution, whereas European countries are concerned with the welfare of respondents. This ethical framework also considers how respondents are subjects of the research (thus under the remit of human subjects research), and/or authors of texts that are being researched (e.g. bloggers, journalists, forum users). As a result, the debate over public and private spaces online can become complicated. In a recent update to its

ethics statement, AoIR has established a section of their website[21] where case studies can be published for researchers to refer to, as a way of creating a practice-based approach to ethics as new methods and types of website are created (AoIR, 2012). My research concerns both an online culture, and using the internet as a research tool. In the following sections, each strand of the research is examined and the ethical considerations that arise in each.

4.6.1 The Ethics of Participant Observation in an Online Game

Many studies of online games suggest the importance of participant observation in researching a game, which is quite easy to achieve (Boellstorff et al., 2012). With an offline setting, participant observation carries the risk that the researcher can affect the group being studied through their presence (Bryman, 2008). In becoming more self-conscious of the researcher, the group can behave differently. With an online game, the researcher can be much less visible as there is no need to announce one's presence. It is quite easy to sit at a computer, with a notebook, and scribble away furiously without feeling as if one is intruding too much (Williams, 2007). For example, in most games there are places where avatars tend to congregate, and do not necessarily move for a while, such as the Aetheryte camps highlighted above, as well as certain areas of the cities. In these areas, it is possible to take screenshots and write notes, which could be perceived as intrusive to do so in a public offline space. Eynon et al. (2008) and Nardi (2010) refer to online games as "third spaces", that is, spaces which are a mix of private and public, such as parks, or bars. Moreover, through the use of screenshots, and note-taking, it is also easy to take capture data while on the move, or taking part in battles. Boellstorff et al. (2012) also emphasise

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[21] http://ethics.aoir.org

that areas of high traffic in an online game are viewed as public, and that taking screenshots is acceptable.

Yet, players were unaware that I was a researcher while I was conducting this phase of the study. In offline participant observation, it is recognised that a researcher cannot possibly always gain informed consent for research purposes where there are high numbers of people, or declaring oneself to be a researcher could affect the setting (Bryman, 2008). Hudson and Bruckman (2004) also found this to be the case in a study of chatrooms, where they announced their presence as they entered. This often resulted in their expulsion from the chatroom, which would have left them unable to gather any data. In an online game, there are similar issues with numbers of people.

Figure 17 My avatar Rill standing on the outskirts of the Adventurers' Guild in the city of Limsa Lominsa.

Figure 18 Observing a group in the city of Ul'dah, in the desert region of Thanalan.

I use two wide angle screenshots here for illustrative purposes. At any given time, areas of the game can become very congested. Looking at the mini-map in the top right hand corner of both images, which displays the immediate area around the player, the white dots represent other players also in the area. The avatars standing in an area are always susceptible to change – in the second screenshot, the avatars with white rings around them are preparing to teleport somewhere else. When teleporting, there is a short animation, which starts with white rings circling, then they form a funnel upwards and the avatar vanishes to their next location. Given the high number of avatars here with rings around them, it is likely that they are all travelling together in a large group. Other avatars only appear in a fairly limited range around the player, and messages can only be broadcast to players that are within sight of the avatar. The transient population in a particular area means that it would be impractical to keep asking for informed consent. Boellstorff et al. (2012) suggest that such spaces are so public that informed consent is not necessary, however the researcher still needs to judge if an expectation of privacy exists in a space, no matter how public. To this end, usernames will be smudged in screenshots out of respect for players in public spaces. Though screenshots are acceptable, it is unlikely that players would expect to see themselves in academic work.

4.6.2 Ethics and Online Interviews

One of the larger issues with online interviews concerns the lack of face-to-face interaction. In this way, it is harder to tell if the respondent is upset by a line of questioning for example (James and Busher, 2006). Having said that, my list of questions did not contain anything sensitive that would obviously cause offence. Most of the questions concerned their avatar and its role in the game, as well as their online friends and interactions. Yet, by allowing the respondents space to consider

their replies in advance, they can decide what they should put in their reply. Yet, it could be suggested that the lack of embodied presence can also flatten power relations in the interview encounter to some extent. Unlike in a face-to-face interview, it is easier for the respondent to withdraw from the interview all-together. Moreover, the lack of face-to-face interaction can mean that the interview is less affected by power relations between researcher and respondent. The ability to easily withdraw offers the respondent a more equal position. Nevertheless, I am still situated as a white woman of a similar age to many of the respondents, and affiliated with a university in the UK. Yet, the relationship was not just one-way as suggested by Laguna, when he signed off a message with the following:

> Anyway, Emma, thank you for taking the time to read my response. Feel free to ask any more questions as long as the length of the response isn't an issue!

Laguna wrote lengthy replies, and kept asking if I minded reading his "soapbox" musings, which he claimed filled his normally empty lunch hour. The implication here is that I still have a degree of power here, as he wishes to make sure that his responses are what I want to hear, and that it does not cause me undue effort to read his answers. At the same time, the interview helped him to pass the time at work, so he benefited from the exchanges too.

Another issue arises in regard to power relations – should the researcher keep following up with a respondent who has ceased replying? In some instances, it is hard to read the situation as to whether the respondent has merely forgotten to reply due to pressing concerns elsewhere in their lives, or that they wish to withdraw from the study completely (James and Busher, 2006). Orgad (2005) suggests sending an email to remind them about the interview for example, however I felt quite awkward

about that. The majority did reach a natural end, and I sent a message thanking them for their participation. A handful simply stopped replying, but I was wary of appearing to be "spam" in their inboxes, that is, continuing to contact them in a disrespectful or annoying manner. I opted not to send reminder emails, which may have meant that a few interviews were not wrapped up properly. Additionally, many of the respondents did not given me an offline name – often they only gave the avatar's name or a username for the forum they were using. Many users often use the same usernames in all of their online accounts (Bassett and O'Riordan, 2002). Consequently, I promised to change their usernames at the outset of the interview. Only one respondent explicitly stated that she did not mind if I referred to her username as she felt sufficiently "protected" by it. Nonetheless, I noticed her posting on two forums using the same username since it was highly unusual. Boellstorff et al. (2012) also note that avatar names can be searched for on the official sites of games. Final Fantasy XIV permits an avatar search that also brings up avatar characteristics, Linkshell memberships and player blog. Within an online game, internal anonymity poses a problem, where particular, well-known players could be identified from their activity. This means that care needs to be taken in what is written about a particular player, otherwise anonymising names becomes pointless. Usernames and avatar names have thus been replaced with names from the Final Fantasy series, since most of my respondents stated they were fans of the series.

4.6.3 Ethics and Forum Observation

Research into online forums, as well as other textual material drawn from the internet, has been considered problematic. Eynon et al. (2008) hold that the main issue is how the internet offers "privacy in public" (p.27). AoIR (2002) also suggests that researchers need to consider how their respondents view their online

contributions – do they perceive their forum posts or blogs as for private audiences only? Sveningsson Elm (2009) clarifies the problem further, by positing that notions of public and private online as a continuum. She borrows from Gold's notion of the different types of participant observation (from full observer to full participant, and variations along the way), and characterises different levels of public and private: public; semi-public (accessible to anyone but requires registration); semi-private (requires membership dictated by formal requirements); and private. This list is by no means exhaustive, but it provides a useful starting point. The notion of audience may also complicate this further, as noted above. Sveningsson Elm (2009) also posits the idea of "fuzzy boundaries", which leave users in a potentially precarious position, where they may not realise how public their communication is (p.77). These ideas also complicate researchers' attempts to garner informed consent. With forums, the questions revolve around the fuzzy boundary, and the audience that the user believes she is writing for.

So, how can forums be approached ethically as a research site? Anyone can view the official Final Fantasy XIV forum, however only players with active accounts could post messages. Moderators constantly reminded users not to reveal personal information about themselves for this reason. Yet, this did not seem to prevent users posting personal material. In one thread, a discussion about cybersex took an unusual turn when one user stated it would lead to teens being abused by strangers, something she was concerned about having been abused in childhood. This is obviously an extreme example, though a moderator did intervene, yet it does illustrate the problem of privacy in public. Moinian (2006) suggests that bloggers believe their audience will be sympathetic towards their posts, and the same could be said of forums. Even where a forum is publicly available, users may assume that

only people who are sympathetic will read the forum, especially if it caters towards a particular interest. The perception of privacy (and anonymity) leads to a degree of disinhibition on forums too. Consequently, the material from the forum also needs to be handled sensitively, and usernames are removed, just as with the interviews.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the process behind the fieldwork, including an exploration of methods and ethics. Qualitative methods were used to build an ethnography of this particular game, its related spaces such as forums, and its players. Initially, I considered the relationship between offline ethnography, and how online ethnography builds on similar principles with certain key modifications. These include an alternate conception of presence, the importance of defining the ethnographic field site, and a consideration of the role of play in ethnographic fieldwork. The case was also put forward for exploring how social research methods can be reframed in online research in interesting but useful ways. For example, the process of online asynchronous interviewing included an original use of photo elicitation using screenshots of avatars, which represents a novel refashioning of existing social methods in a newer digital terrain. This also suggests that online spaces do not necessarily require totally new methods to co-produce interesting and important data with respondents, but the researcher can effectively revisit existing social research methods and be open to how they can be reconfigured in such spaces. Moreover, existing knowledge regarding areas such as ethics can be evaluated for online spaces, especially for studies like this, which still involve research with respondents. Researchers must also be aware of how trust and rapport may be interpreted differently online, and can be generated much faster in some ways. The research design also enabled the creation of a significant dataset that is appropriate

for answering the research question outlined in the introductory chapter and offers new sources of sociological knowledge. In terms of methodological contributions, this study offers the first use (to the best of my knowledge) of photo elicitation in an online interview, as well as contributing to the sociological debates around online ethnography and social research methods. The following chapters are the analysis chapters, comprising an examination of how identities can be enacted through the body of the avatar, and closer explorations of race, gender and sexuality in online gaming. Data generated through the methods outlined in this chapter will be presented.

<u>Chapter 5 The Performative Online Identity: Learning to Play and the "Doing" of</u>

<u>Identity</u>

This chapter is concerned with the first research question, which relates to how online identity is enacted through the avatar and on lower bandwidth forums. It also starts to address the second question regarding the relationship between performative identity and authenticity, and aspects of the third concerning how gaming culture shapes the enactment of performative identity through social interaction with other gamers. The previous chapters have outlined a performative approach to identity as an alternative way of looking at the relationship between the player and her avatar, and the enactment of performative identity through the embodied avatar. As discussed in chapter two, authors such as Nardi (2010) and Bainbridge (2010) neglect the debates around the avatar as a mode of representation, or the way in which players relate to their own avatar, and those of others. Bainbridge (2010) denied that any of his avatars affected him, and Nardi (2010) neglects how avatars are interpreted in multiple ways.

The theoretical position of this study, put forward in chapter three, stakes a claim in the importance of the performative aspect of play, where players take a range of norms into account and enact an avatar identity on this basis. Butler's (1990) work points to how performativity can be accomplished through stylisations and utterances, which create the perception of a stable identity. The avatar, however, need not be so fixed, and has the potential to offer players access to a mode of expression and representation without the same material and discursive constraints that they may feel in their everyday lives. Some interview respondents also put forward the notion of meta-roleplay, which they claimed enabled a way of enacting an identity based on the embodiment of the avatar. At the same time, there are limits

imposed by the game community and the player herself, which mean the multiple identities proposed by Turkle (1995) can never realistically be achieved.

This chapter therefore teases out the ways in which players can "do" identity when playing this particular game. At the start of a game, there is always a period in which the player is shown how to do certain things, such as communicate with others, walk around, fight battles and so on. This period is crucial for learning how to enact identity, in that one learns the ways in which identity can be managed and performed to others. A player's previous history as a gamer is also important here. The shared sense of often unspoken rules around gaming also affects how players behave towards others. The history of the player can also provide clues as to how the player will proceed in a new game, given the remarkable attachment players seem to feel towards particular avatars. This is also intended to provide contextual information about this group of players, who have a particular background of playing Final Fantasy games, which seems to differentiate them from others. The first part of this chapter examines how performative identity is accomplished in this particular game and its forum, drawing on and developing the work of Butler (1990), as well as van Zoonen's (2013) notion of authenticity. Then the second part explores the specific gaming history that applies to this community and the role of such past experience in shaping the performance of identity. This chapter thus lays the foundations for considering in later chapters how other aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality and race/'race' are perceived by this particular community. In this chapter, screenshots are partly used for illustrative purposes, and analysis.

5.1 Learning to Play: Social Interaction and the Performance of Identity

In order to perceive how identity is performed, the types of communication available to players must be examined. Chapter three examined the notion of performative identity through the work of Judith Butler (1990). She holds that identity is enacted on a moment-by-moment basis through stylisations and utterances. The chapter posited that this approach to identity could offer insights into the performance of identity online. Over the course of this chapter, the possibilities around performative identity are explored through the avatar and forums, drawing on interview data and forum threads. The following sections detail how social interaction takes place in Final Fantasy XIV and its forum. On the one hand, the avatar offers embodied interaction that taps into embodied knowledge (Hayles, 1999), as well as the use of chat between players. On the other hand, players also talk on forums about themselves and the game. These are performative ways of enacting online identity.

5.1.1 Learning to Talk: The Use of Chat in the Performance of Identity

When starting out in any type of video game, the player is often presented with a series of lessons, called tutorials, which demonstrate different elements of the game. All Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) feature a chat box, normally in a corner of the screen like the one below.
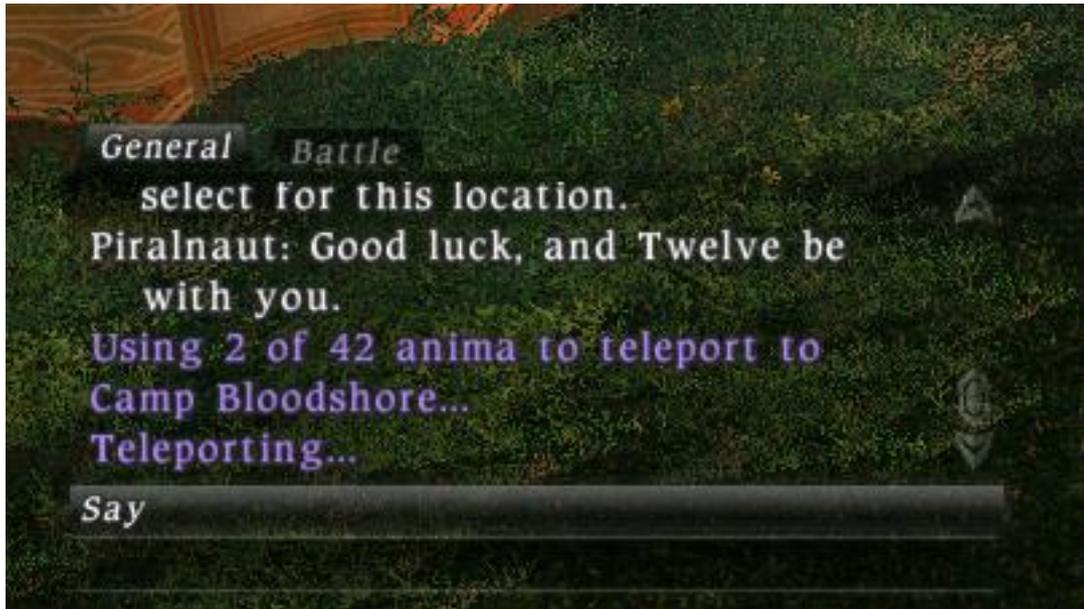
Figure 19 The chat box in Final Fantasy XIV, which is normally situated in the bottom left-hand corner.

The player types in the area marked "Say" and a message is broadcast to anyone nearby. If someone in the area says anything, it also appears in this box. Alternatively a "tell" can be sent to particular players, or chat can take place within a party of avatars only. System messages are also reported here, such as the purple message in the screenshot after I teleported to this location. The other main mode of communication is through emotes, which are actions performed by the avatar to add mood. For example, instead of typing "haha" in the chat box in response to a joke, the player can select "laugh" from a menu, or type "/laugh" in the chat box, and the avatar will burst out laughing. Adept players can use these in the course of conversations very easily to signify emotional intent (Williams, 2007; Boellstorff, 2008), though this does take practice. New players can be discerned by their lack of familiarity with such fine details, such as triggering emotes at the wrong time (Boellstorff, 2008). Using emotes at the correct juncture in conversation is learnt through repetition and practice. This is also why players view the avatar as their social representative in the game (Taylor, 2003), as it becomes the focus of social

interaction with others. In interviews, players explained how they spoke to their online friends in the game through the avatar, which is discussed in more depth later. Its embodied actions through emotes instil a sense of presence to a certain extent in the player. Nevertheless, emotes enhance communication in various ways that cannot be achieved in textual online spaces, and remain an important part of an identity performance. Indeed, communication provides proof that the player is a "real" human in the first instance.

Social interaction remains a signifier of humanity, or not being a "bot", in many MMORPGs. Bots, which are programs that control an avatar and are used to fulfil mundane tasks in the player's absence (Dibbell, 2008), are a problem in many MMORPGs. Particular aspects of this online game (and others) are seen as dull. Taylor (2006) discusses how "power" gamers use a host of strategies to make progress in the most efficient way possible. This can mean the use of such programs to leave the avatar accomplishing a boring task, while the player is at work, for example. Often, gathering, where the avatar accumulates a type of item using repetitive tasks, is considered quite dull in comparison to fighting. In Final Fantasy XIV, botany consists of the avatar looking for the right tree or bush to gather natural materials such as wood, nectar, or types of bark, which can be profitable, but time-consuming. Instead, the player can theoretically set-up a bot program to control their avatar in a limited fashion, so that it will keep gathering in the same area. Other players may set up a bot to leave an avatar killing monsters repeatedly to gain experience more quickly, so that their avatar becomes more powerful with much less effort on the part of the player.

In her study of EverQuest players, Taylor (2006) noted how such actions were seen as a form of cheating, even though it can be hard to discern bots. Bots are also used

in real-money trading (RMT) practices, whereby valuable materials, or even high level avatars, are bought on sites such as eBay, or more specialist sites, even though such behaviour is strictly against the rules of most games (Dibbell, 2008). Another alternative to bots are "gold farmers", who are pre-dominantly low-paid Chinese workers, playing online games to earn money or to accumulate goods to sell (Nakamura, 2009). Consequently, assumptions around the gold farmer or bot perceived to be engaging in illicit RMT activity also conform to a racialised stereotype. Nakamura (2009) notes that in World of Warcraft, gold farmers allegedly do not speak when spoken to and persistently undertake the same actions for hours at a time, such as killing monsters for the items that they drop, which can then be sold. Gamers can often spot bots after a time in a game. In some instances, it can be blatantly obvious that is not necessarily "right" about an avatar. In my opinion, the following screenshot shows a group of bots in the foreground.

Figure 20 Bots in the Adventurers' Guild

I was hanging out in the Adventurers' Guild in the city of Ul'dah looking for things to do, when I noticed this group come in. I have not blurred the names of the avatars, because I believe they are bots. The names seem random, as if someone has hit a selection of keys in an indiscriminate manner, without the usual care most players give to naming an avatar. Moreover, they all have the same hair colour and are dressed in very basic clothing, which has not been improved, unlike the avatar they were following. Upon entering the Guild, the group seemed to be moving together, following another Lalafell avatar, which is a common feature of bots. It is likely that the person was using the group to gain more materials or money to be sold to other players, or "playing" the system to improve their avatar's levelling. At the time, it was widely discussed on various forums that the fastest way to progress was playing in groups of a five or six, which this bot system could be using.

The suspected gold farmer, or bot, can be subjected to a range of punishments. In Final Fantasy XIV, bots appear to be more of a significant threat than gold farmers in the eyes of the players. A range of threads exist on the official forum, with players documenting alleged bots with YouTube videos and screenshots, including the thread simply titled "Bot". Frustrated that the in-game Special Task Force, set up to tackle the problem of RMT, ignored requests to ban an alleged bot, one player published his attempts to hamper the bot's activities on the forum. This bot was seen running around a particular area attacking the same variety of monster over and over, apparently only pausing to lock on to a new target. The player claimed it failed to respond to chat messages, but was also unable to consistently target the monsters and sometimes targeted other players, and followed them around. This also seemed to confirm that it was a bot rather than a gold farmer, as a gold farmer would not target a player. To 'punish' the bot, the player deliberately led it to an area with aggressive

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monsters that would automatically attack anyone in the vicinity (most monsters typically do nothing unless attacked first), which is known as monster-player killing (MPK or MPKing).

The key point is in the testing of a bot. As Nakamura (2009) suggests, the main proof of being a bot is a combination of being unable to respond to interaction from others and undertaking repetitive actions. Thus being able to communicate with others becomes a test of being an "authentic" human or an abject bot (or gold farmer). Chapter three examined the work of van Zoonen (2013) in relation to authenticity. She suggests that an authentic identity is one derived from a single body, and I also discussed this idea in relation to Butler's (1990) work on heteronormativity and performativity. Here though, it seems as if players must initially prove that they are 'real' humans. To be accepted by other players, they must behave as if they are a 'true' human, in a single body that follows the normative expectations of how play should proceed. This thread and others like it suggest that no 'human' could enjoy relentlessly pursuing the same task, which 'others' the player, by failing to pursue expected forms of pleasure. In the game space, a repetitive performance that lacks acknowledgement of others and their messages leads to the attribution of this apparently contemptible identity. Being 'discovered' is thus cause for vigilante punishment.

Yet in this particular thread, other explanations emerge for an alleged bot. Some players believe that crafting and gathering are too boring to be undertaken for long periods of time and anyone doing so 'must' be a bot. However, players who craft replied with other explanations in the same thread such as this: "I read and craft. If I don't respond [to other players] it's because I'm getting to the Good Part ~ :D" (Post date: 8th August 2011). Others mentioned allowing their children to do crafting for

them, but turning off chat so that their children do not view anything untoward being discussed. Indeed, in the screenshots provided by the player who started this thread, there is a conversation taking place in the Linkshell chat about how one person had seemed unresponsive earlier, which was because this person had done this exact thing with their child! This was also pointed out by players reading the thread who wondered if it constituted child labour, while another believed this was an excuse for using a bot.

This point also adds an interesting dynamic. The unresponsive person had previously proved their humanity through social interaction with their Linkshell. Therefore, others were concerned by the lack of response but did not jump to any conclusions, even if the avatar's actions seemed unusual. However, someone who had never encountered this avatar before could have thought it was a bot. Moreover, these norms around bots and interaction only become apparent to experienced gamers. To an outsider, the alleged bot would not necessarily look out of place. It is only through the accumulation of knowledge about gaming that the differentiation can be made. It also seems problematic to assume that an avatar who fails to respond to (often English) messages is a bot. In order to be recognised as a human, social interaction is deemed paramount. For those who do not speak English very well, this is not possible and, as Nakamura (2009) and this thread suggest, harassment is a problem. This point around language is returned to in chapter seven, however, it is a cause for concern in an international game. Additionally, if parents allow children to play the game using their avatar, but with chat turned off, then responding to others is simply impossible. However, prior to embarking on an identity performance through interacting with other players, proving one's humanity comes first.

The process of learning how to communicate becomes a fundamental part of being recognised by others. Part of Butler's (2004) work is related to this topic more broadly as well, in terms of performing identity so that one is not perceived as abject in the eyes of others. This includes those who try to subvert heteronormativity by performing gender outside of the heterosexual gender binary, for example. The danger for those considered abject by society is that they become susceptible to symbolic, or actual, violence (Butler, 1993). In online games, the need to behave as a fully *social* subject results in this form of testing by other players. The lack of response to social interaction is equated to a failing of authentic 'human' behaviour, which can be met with symbolic violence in the form of MPK actions, and public shaming on forums combined with reporting the avatar to in-game moderators. The community thus polices its own behaviours by enforcing the notion that being sociable is not just desirable, but the ultimate proof of offline existence. Moreover, the players' belief that English ought to be the dominant language and that those failing to respond to English messages can be mistreated is highly problematic. The poor relationship between the Japanese and Euro-American players is returned to in chapter seven. The community also establishes norms surrounding communication in both the game, and the forums, which also mean that social interaction and the performance of identity can only be achieved along particular lines. The social standards applied to interaction are considered in much greater depth later in this chapter, but prior to this, the importance of emotes must be outlined to give a fuller picture of social interaction, and how it can be enhanced using these embodied actions.

5.1.2 The Importance of Emotes in Social Interaction

Players regularly use emotes in various ways during social interaction. The main aim is to add mood, or emotion to textual conversations, or sometimes to replace speech all-together. In an interview, Balthier explained how he used them.

> I like to use the emotes in parties or other player to player interactions over speaking in chat. /bow /praise as thank you, /no /yes to answer, /rally just for the funny text "[Balthier] engages in general jappery"
>
> And my favorite: /examineself
>
> "[Balthier] admires himself"
>
> "[Balthier] shows himself off to XXXX"
>
> For when I do something impressive or level up. [28, Male, New Jersey]

When typing an emote into the chatbox (such as "/bow" mentioned above), a particular text is normally signalled in the local area, which Balthier is talking about here, and is joined by a particular action in the avatar. Below is a screenshot taken while using the "/joy" emote.

Figure 21 My avatar Rill uses the "/joy" emote, which to others would say "Rill motions joyfully" in their chat box.

Rill, as a Sea Wolf Roegadyn, shows joy by punching the air animatedly. Yet, it is worth remembering that it is not *his* joy being shown here, it is actually mine. Overall, the Roegadyn gestures are markedly macho, given the size of this particular race. In contrast, here is another avatar Ferdy, a male Dunesfolk Lalafell doing the same emote.

Figure 22 My other avatar Ferdy also using "/joy", a more carefree, unrestrained gesture compared to Rill.

The emotes of the Lalafell compared to the Roegadyn are more outlandish and expressive in many ways, however each race will only ever do emotes in the same way. In my notes for these screenshots from my fieldwork diary, the first one with Rill was part of an experiment to see how they looked. I had deliberately travelled somewhere quite remote to try them out without looking foolish. In the second, I had become more adept with them, and was pleased that I had reached this place. Even though I did not know anyone around, it just seemed like a fitting thing to do.

These emotes are perceived as improving interaction, which can assist communicating meaning in the absence of visual social cues (Boellstorff, 2008). Though this topic will be returned to later in chapter seven, certain races seem to encourage the use of emotes more readily, especially with the Lalafell. As Vivi told me:

> In my current avatar, I'm not too prone to using lots of emotes in normal conversation unless I'm speaking with folks who are using them plenty, I like to adapt my tone to suit the recipients. As a taru/lalafell[22] however I ended up using tons of them, it seemed to fit with the characteristics of the avatars. [25, Male, Cincinnati, unemployed]

In this way, emotes can be deployed to suit the situation. Players react in different ways depending on their avatar race, though other players also expressed a dislike of using them too much, suggesting that using too many could make one seem immature, especially where the Lalafell are concerned. As discussed in chapter seven, the Lalafell are perceived to be child-like due to their height and physical

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[22] In Final Fantasy XI, the equivalent to a Lalafell was the Tarutaru. The two look fairly similar and consequently players tend to view them as related, a point which is discussed more in chapter seven.

features. In turn, the player is also considered immature, but as Vivi suggests, this is partly interpellation.

The use of emotes can also suggest that conversations are taking place around you. The following screenshot can be analysed, pointing out the ways in which two players seem to be communicating, even though there is no way of knowing what is being said. Many offline norms around communication have been perpetuated by online gamers, such as maintaining distance from the person you are conversing with (Taylor, 2002). Here it is possible to perceive Hayles' (1999) concept of embodied knowledge being reinterpreted in online spaces, as discussed in chapter three.

Figure 23 Two avatars, in the centre, are conversing in the Adventurer's Guild in Ul'da**h**

Figure 24 Detail version.

Here I focus on the two Lalafell avatars, CC and PM in the foreground, who seem to be having a conversation, while LS, on the right-hand side seems to be watching. These three are all in the same Linkshell, since the shield next to their names is the same, which are designed by individual Linkshells. In the chat box, a series of emotes has been used in the course of the conversation, with CC currently trying to comfort PM, raising his hands as if trying to hug him. Judging by the series of emotes, PM has told CC something upsetting, with the rest of the text probably being relayed through a private conversation via "tells". Though I have no way of knowing whether these two players are even near each other, in the same room, or separated by some distance, the desire to add emotional content to the conversation is clear. It could be for example that CC is saying "aww poor you!" or something similar, while enacting an emote to show sympathy.

The emote thus has the potential to deepen the emotional meaning of the conversation taking place, beyond simple text. It is also noticeable that they are standing face-to-face and looking at each other. The next section covers this in more depth, but part of the norms of social interaction in online games revolves around the

positioning of avatars tapping into notions of embodied knowledge. Personal space remains important with avatars, since they are actually porous – it is possible to literally run through a crowd of avatars (Boellstorff, 2008). Two avatars can intersect each other during a conversation unless a certain distance is maintained (Williams, 2007). Yet, these two have deliberately chosen to position themselves in this way. Taylor (2002) noted that even at an early stage in online graphical worlds, users still moved their avatars closer together to demonstrate feelings, such as intimacy or anger, depending on the context. Using the Linkshell chat, or even private chat, it is possible for a conversation to be conducted while the avatars are in different areas of the game. Technically, the two avatars could even be on different sides of this room and still talk to each other. However, they have consciously decided to conduct their conversation in close proximity to each other. Embodied knowledge is referred to in conversations between avatars, emphasising how players perceive the avatar to be an embodied social representative.

One of my interview respondents Auron represents an unusual case, but is worth discussing at this point. He mentioned during the interview that he played the game with a group of friends he had known for 20 years, then he described how they use emotes when communicating with each other in-game.

> I do think that the emotes have an important part in the game. Mostly I and my friends use them for the "meta-rp" [roleplay] I mentioned before. For example, one of use does something stupid like running into a wall, the /laugh <friend> is a great way of poking fun at them. Most of the emotes I use are ones such as /poke, /laugh, /doze, /meh. I find that they are also a good way of communicating with people who are not in the same room with us. My friends and I are fortunate in that we are able to game together in the

same room and do not have to use chat to talk. We utilize the emotes most with other players who we may be partying with.

On a side note, my friends and I often use the chat even when we are together. We will send tells to each other as a way of "talking behind someone's back" in a humorous way. "Who invited the PLD[23]" when the third person in the room is the PLD, or "You gave, so and so too much cat-nip[24]". All three of us can see what the tells are since we game on wall projection screens so there is a good amount of poking fun at each other. This is usually a part of our "meta-rp" that we do with each other. I guess you could say that we often use the chat function as the RP component and our voices when we are planning our attacks etc. [40, Male, Technical Writer, Edmonton, Canada]

The three of them would meet up two or three nights per week, bringing their laptops to use with a projector, so that they could each see their screens in the same room. This excerpt demonstrates the complex level of interaction taking place here, which shifts between the online game, and the offline room in which they are playing. They have all known each other for a long time, and had built up a repertoire of in-jokes, especially as they had played Final Fantasy XI together. Much of their interaction was between themselves, though they also included others in their Linkshell. The notion of "meta-rp", or "lite rp" as some of the others expressed it, is closely examined in the following chapters, since it represents a useful conceptual tool for the purposes of this study, and this excerpt exemplifies its function well. A number

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[23] PLD refers to Paladin, one of the jobs from Final Fantasy XI and refers to how this job's role has been transferred by players into Final Fantasy XIV. Intended as a joke.
[24] Jokes around catnip were a feature of how the feline Miqo'te were often addressed by other players.

of players from the first wave of interviews in particular mentioned trying to incorporate aspects of the avatar into their play. For example, Auron and his friends address the avatar as if it were the person, as well as the avatar in question, such as how they addressed Auron's Miqo'te avatar. This part of social interaction has an interpellating aspect, in that the player is being hailed to perform like a cat, even though the Miqo'te are not associated with feline behaviour in the game's narrative, nor does catnip even exist in the game. However, the discourse being enacted is the association of the feline Miqo'te with cat behaviour, such as consuming catnip, chasing their tails, or speaking with a rolling R in chat. The players thus enact a distinction between talking as the avatar, with other avatars, or talking as the player, to other players. This can involve a complex negotiation of the use of chat on the screen, combined with emotes, as well as using voice conversation offline, and in some instances even using another chat program, such as MSN to have a separate conversation too. In this way, it is possible to switch between enacting the player's identity, and that of the avatar, depending on the way the player or avatar speaks and how other players talk to them.

Erkenbrack (2012) conducted a semiotic analysis on conversations within a group of World of Warcraft players to show the use of different registers between members of a team. She notes in particular the use of specialised knowledge relating to the game, which leads players to switch between different types of conversation on the fly, ranging from the types of in-jokes discussed by Auron, to detailed specific knowledge relating to a particular battle within the game. The importance of citing specific knowledge in the game to show oneself to be a competent player (and an insider) has been demonstrated by Golub (2010) and Taylor (2006) as well. Such speech affects both the performance of the avatar identity, and depends on being able

to recognise particular game references, but also marks the knowledgeable player who has the experience to shift through such a complex range of different speech patterns. Performative identity in an online game depends on the player's gaming experience, and knowledge of a particular game's mechanisms. Effectively, players must learn how to transfer their embodied and gaming knowledge to a new avatar, in order to make performative utterances that emanate from both the player and the avatar.

Using emotes can also be open to interpretation by players referring to embodied knowledge. Valkyrie (2011) notes how players may use emotes to signify other gestures than those originally intended by the developers. In the case of cybersex, players reframe the meaning of particular emotes for the purpose of mimicking sexual activities. Pearce and Artemesia (2009) refer to such behaviour in online worlds as emergent, covering a range of different activities that are taken up by players in ways that are not originally envisaged by the developers. Some of my respondents, such as Penelo, also pointed to novel ways of using emotes.

> Emotes can also be comical when accompanied by others from another person. In FFXI [Final Fantasy XI], a hume [Hyur equivalent] female /cheer looks a lot like an uppercut, while the male hume /stagger can be matched up perfectly together to look like she is hitting him in the jaw. [25, Female, US, Army Medic]

In this example, the appearance is important, not the textual accompaniment, to generate a comic effect. Such behaviour also demonstrates two other points. Once again, it is possible to see the overlap between the online game, and the way embodied, offline actions can be perceived and reinterpreted online. These gestures

remain a fundamental aspect of social interaction for performative identity in such spaces. The other key point here is how this demonstrates Hayles' (1999) notion of "embodied knowledge", as well as Butler's (2004) discussion of how social norms must be embodied. In chapter three, Hayles' (1999) work on the relationship between technology and the embodied user was discussed, as well as the contribution of Grosz (2001) in this area too. Though there has been more of an effort to outline the relationship between the embodied player and the avatar through affect and emotion in the work of Bromseth and Sundén (2011) and Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) for example, much of the work on embodiment in online and offline video games involves the avatar signalling presence as well as encouraging instinctive reactions. In effect, the game is *doing something to* the player, which creates an emotional response or instinctive reaction, which Thornham (2011) especially problematises. Though the visceral, sensorial aspect of gaming is important, she holds that the player is not just a passive receiver of messages from the game. The avatar makes the player feel as if they are in the world, thus leaving behind the corporeal form at the keyboard, which I have noted is heavily problematic. Grosz (2001) especially criticises this view as being inherently masculine, by privileging an escape from messy, corporeal reality into cleaner, more controllable virtual reality. In this way, games may superficially permit a greater level of control, or at least the illusion of it, which is also examined in the following chapters.

Hayles (1999) sought to reformulate the relationship between new technology and the user by noting the ways in which different embodied gestures are instilled in children from a young age, and how the development of new technology can change this. Learning to type for example is an embodied skill, developed through repetitive

use of a computer. Avatars cannot change how they perform emotes, and chapter six concerning gender examines the different ways in which avatars sit, yet players respond by using emotes in emergent ways, referring directly to their embodied knowledge. This also taps into instinctive aspects of embodiment, due to the reaction speed needed to enact an emote and talk at the same time. Hayles (1999) discusses how typing is learned, however many gamers need to be able to type very quickly. In his account of Second Life, Boellstorff (2008) notes how expert users were able to deftly use emotes while chatting, which gives the impression of an expert user, who has been part of Second Life for a long time. Such typing becomes instinctive, whether it be pure chat, or including emotes.

The mobilisation of these different modes of communication, which involves the embodied knowledge of the player, becomes crucial to performative identity in MMORPGs, as well as interpellating others into particular positions based on aspects of the avatar identity. This section has identified the main ways for players to establish a performative identity through social interaction, as well as how discourses can be evoked to perpetuate particular ideas about a race or a specific avatar. Gamers can also switch between different ways of referring to the same person, whether they are communicating as avatars, or as players, meaning that a different register may be evoked, or the idea of meta-roleplay, which is expanded upon in the next section.

5.2 Meta-Roleplay and the Enactment of Identity

During the first wave of interviews, players discussed the notion of meta-roleplay, or "lite" roleplay, tapping into the practice of roleplay in online games. Tronstad (2008) explains how roleplay involves creating an avatar with a narrative embedded in the game's history, and the player will only speak in character, with no references to the

offline. However, roleplay is a contested pastime, frequently seen as weird, such as Nardi's (2010) claim that the practice just involves talking differently. In interviews, I asked if players had ever participated in roleplay, and many were dismissive, or eager to distance themselves from it. Yet, some admitted to a form of roleplay, which they referred to as "meta-rp" in the case of Auron, or some of the others, such as Barret, mentioned "RP lite", who explained his approach as follows.

> A couple months ago i stumbled onto a npc [non-player character] that had various interesting things to say about some of the games races and clans. Hellsguard [one of the Roegadyn clans] was one of her "Topics of research". I was pleased to find out that what i was already doing was pretty much cannon behavior for a hellsguard, save for one thing According to this npc Alchemy[25] was generally regarded by them as a Blasphemous dark art that was an affront to the twelve[26]. It was kind of a fun mental exercise to figure out why my character would be doing something so against his culture and upbringing. now as part of my rp lite when i craft something as an alchemist i generaly find an out of the way spot to do it in. [30, Male USA]

Barret later stated that his attitude towards his avatar may be unusual, but in fact, other respondents mentioned similar ways of thinking about their avatar. Others also discussed contemplating the motives that their avatars may have, as well as how their avatars may behave in certain situations, based on intersections of its identity. This notion also troubles certain ideas put forward in chapter two for example. Valkyrie (2012) offers the view that authentic identities are demanded in online games by players. This has been proved through the ways in which gender is demanded to

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[25] Alchemy is one of the crafting classes, making potions and crystals for the most part.
[26] The Twelve are deities in the game's narrative.

authenticate identity, as well as to push for transparency. To this end, Valkyrie (2012) suggests that "being yourself" is rigorously enforced online as the avatar is considered to be an extension of the player, rejecting gender experimentation and roleplay outright. Van Zoonen's (2013) work also points to pressure being exerted in online spaces to maintain an authentic identity, which is congruent with the "real" player. I argue that players see the avatar as an extension of themselves, but roleplay is not just the preserve of a select group, and can take many forms. Even if the player claims to reject it, their actions with the avatar suggest something else. In chapter two, the link between children and video gaming was posited as strong, for example in the effects research, where the danger to children is emphasised, continuing the discourse that games are threatening. However, I would argue that gamers must continually frame their hobby in relation to this discourse. Thornham (2011) also points to how the adult male gamers she studied rejected forms of pleasure that could be deemed child-like, with greater emphasis on socialisation, rationalisation and a rejection of immersion. She sums this up as follows:

> Pleasure as identification, as narrative or avatar investment or as emotional involvement in the ethos of the game, is claimed as excessive, geek and perverse. (Thornham, 2011: 48)

She particularly frames the "geek", or lone male gamer as a questionable stereotype that the players wish to distance themselves from, as being an immature state. I argue that this childish aspect of play, which also encompasses imaginative forms like roleplay, is rejected by players to prove that they are mature. Any form of roleplay thus needs to be rationalised to be incorporated into their identity as a player, and steps are taken to create a version that meshes with the possibilities afforded to an "adult" gamer. Consequently, this limits the types of performative identity that can

be enacted by a player, as wildly creative, roleplay-based approaches are firmly out of bounds for many players. Nonetheless, these ideas also challenge the authentic identity approach so often evoked by players, and in existing research. Meta-roleplay and authenticity are often claimed simultaneously by players, which can be seen in the following chapters, despite the apparent tension in such a position. Gender is taken as a marker of authenticity, however this can be subverted to some extent, through meta-roleplay based on the avatar's race. Ultimately, as is discussed in chapter seven, meta-roleplay has its limits with regard to race, due to the limited stereotypes attached to the five races. The tension between such claims is examined throughout these chapters.

Yet, being a gamer also needs to be located more specifically within the context of this player population, as suggested in chapter two. Gaming is a broad subculture encompassing different types of play, and this particular group's details need to be outlined, as part of the answer to the third research question, concerning the effects of gaming culture on the enactment of performative identity. Final Fantasy XIV players are a particular group, in terms of gaming experience. Their gaming history warrants closer examination because it explains (to some extent) why they are so attached to co-operative group play, which in turn has an effect on how performative identity can be enacted, especially within the group. Given that most of the players in this study drew on years of experience playing different types of video games and were thoroughly embedded in the culture of gaming, the next section situates other aspects of learning to play the game within the particular gaming culture that seems to have arisen within this specific community. In earlier chapters, it was noted that the socio-cultural context of gaming changes depending on the country the gamer comes from, such as how South Korean players meet in internet cafés to play online

games, rather than stay at home (Taylor, 2012). Moreover, the relational aspect of the gamer identity was put forward as well, in terms of how gamers need to posit their interest in relation to particular stereotypes around gaming (the lonely male gamer and child gamer respectively). This also affects how a player can situate her avatar's identity and constrains the opportunities for experimentation. Gamers also maintain particular standards of behaviour that are policed by the community, which affect how social interaction can be carried out. In the literature review, the issue of masculine discourse dominating communication seemed especially problematic for example. Though Final Fantasy XIV players maintain this in some ways, the community prizes group interaction and social niceties, which formed an important part of the culture in the game and its community. Players put forward how the "good" Final Fantasy XIV player is sociable, and how a strong or weak community can affect the relationship with the avatar. The following section thus contrasts two ideas – the inculcation of generosity and pro-social behaviour, and the reactions of players who find these values being violated.

5.3 "Why Play an MMORPG if You Don't Want to Hang Out With Other People?": Social Interaction and the Importance of the Group

Valkyrie (2012) has argued that altruism is an important part of online gaming. This can be perceived in the help readily offered to female avatars, who are often deemed to be in more need of help than others. Sveningsson and Sundén (2012) also allude to how being a self-defined female player and rejecting help can make you seem ungrateful, even if it is not needed. However, both of these works also point to how self-defined male players equally benefit from this notion while playing as a female avatar. In interviews, respondents strongly felt that the community spirit in an MMORPG was paramount. For some, it was the main reason for playing

MMORPGs, and in Final Fantasy online games, socialising with others was deemed a deeply important part of the game's culture. In an interview, Zidane put it thus.

> In MMO[RPG]s, I find myself more social in-game and off game. Not that I'm an anti-social in the real world, but it is much easier to get to know others in-game, with same taste in general, than in real life. You can't really go to a mall or a park, get to someone's face and say "Hey there! You need help with anything? I'm planning on making cookies at home, want some?" lol. Instead, in an MMO, you can just go help a low level character just because, or if you need help, just ask your friends and go kill that damn Dragon that has your Magic Shield (in his belly I guess... :p). I remember sometimes I would just go around exploring and talking to friends, not doing anything productive (experience, farming [gathering materials], gil [in-game currency], etc), see my watch and say "whoa it's late, gotta go" lol. [29, Male, Puerto Rico]

Suler's (2004) idea of a benign disinhibition effect online is certainly useful, where online spaces encourage more positive social interaction. For the most part, respondents perceived that MMORPGs promote a kinder social environment, despite the occasional disruptive presence. This is sometimes attributed to the group nature of such online games, where players need to take part in group fights to make the most progress. Rainie and Wellman (2012) also pointed to the promotion of kindness in forums, citing instances of generosity in online communities extending into offline lives, such as raising funds for medical treatment for a member. The need to find a close-knit group within the game was prioritised by many respondents, like Barret.

I do not wish to sound smug or condensing but I think the [Linkshell name] is probably one of the best organized and collaborative [Link]shells on Mysidia [server]. There is nothing that is not with in our grasp. Eorzea [the land in the game] would be a much smaller and colder place if i was not part of such a wonderful and dynamic community. And honestly i do pity those who have not managed to find something like it.

I have said it many times to many people, but the thing that keeps you logging into a mmo[RPG] is not the game, Its the friends you make and the community's you collectively build. The storeys and drama generated by the people that are far more interesting and entertaining then any thing that happens in the back drop of the game world. [30, Male, US]

In the course of the interview, Barret also regularly referred to the Linkshell's achievements, telling me stories about their quests, and sharing knowledge that they had discovered. He and others in the Linkshell had originally been testers for the game, and had spent nearly a year in a group together by this point. Intriguingly though, when I asked if he felt these players were friends of his, he referred to them being more like work colleagues. Others, like Penelo, had made friends playing Final Fantasy XI and continued to play together in Final Fantasy XIV.

My Linkshell is full of many veteran Quetzy[27] players from FFXI [Final Fantasy XI]. Most of them come from [website address] which was our server's own website. I've played/known many of the members for several

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[27] Quetzalcoatl – in Final Fantasy XI, servers were named after mythical beings from the Final Fantasy series. They are typically strong entities that aid the player in battle and are named after various gods or spiritual entities, such as Odin, Shiva and Bahamut.

years. Most of us have families, full time jobs, harder schooling schedules now, so we keep it more causal now a days. [Female, 25, USA, Army Medic]

Penelo and her friends would typically meet three times a week or so in the game, where possible. Most of my respondents had played Final Fantasy XI, which had a strong emphasis on teamwork. Very little could be accomplished without a team, so Final Fantasy XI had a reputation for needing complex group work to progress. Penelo also boasted about her many achievements in Final Fantasy XI, and how that had formed a close bond within the group, much like Barret's comment about spending time together in a group online being so important that it almost supersedes the game itself. Taylor (2006) has discussed the same phenomenon, where gamers leave a game together and maintain their group in a new game, which signifies how close-knit these groups can become, and how they can transcend game spaces.

For some players, the lack of interaction with others led to a feeling of disenchantment, such as Tifa, who felt disconnected from others on the server, despite playing the game with her partner.

I came to Bodhum [server] because two of my friends played there, and within the first few days of beginning to play, they both left the game. I wasn't too shocked, since WoW's [World of Warcraft] expansion was coming soon, but it left my fiancé and I alone. The server is rather small, and nobody really seems to want to talk, other than crafters on occasion. I've looked around for a LS [Linkshell] to join, but most said I was too low [rank], or they wanted to focus on endgame[28]. Endgame can be fun, but after FFXI, I'm

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[28] Endgame Linkshells will typically demand classes of rank 45 up to the maximum rank 50. Tifa's highest at the time of the interview was rank 35 in Conjury, which would not be high enough. These Linkshells also demand a big time commitment, often as much as a full-time job.

not sure I can be expected to do such a thing anymore than on a casual basis, it's far too draining and demanding. I'm not sure how it can fun for anyone to be on an endless schedule like that in a game.

So there's another aspect that takes you out of the game and connection with your character as well, lack of socialization. I'm still trying to find people on my server that don't want to do constant endgame, and we'll see how that ends up. Hopefully it ends well, and ends soon! [24, Female, Oregon, Student]

Although Barret pointed to how the ties formed in such a game are not necessarily strong, Tifa's loneliness in the game points towards how such social interaction remains an important draw for players. For those who played Final Fantasy XI, which needed consistent group play to progress, socialising with other players was paramount and a defining part of the game's culture and community, even in Final Fantasy XIV. Tifa had previously played Final Fantasy XI and missed the companionship in that game in comparison to the lack of socialising in Final Fantasy XIV. Rainie and Wellman's (2012) work suggests that the majority of ties formed online may only ever be deemed weak even in the eyes of users, based around particular interests for example, and how often internet users find ways of spending time with offline family and friends, like Tifa and her fiancé in Final Fantasy XIV. In fact, five other respondents also mentioned playing the game with a partner, or in one instance, actually meeting their current partner through playing an online game together.

Much like Thornham's (2011) adult gamers claiming that their gaming took place in a social setting, these gamers also play MMORPGs to socialise with others − it is

just that they are likelier to be separated by geographical distance. Yet at times, the demand in Final Fantasy XIV for players to be sociable can seem strange, as it has become a dominant discourse within the culture of this community more broadly, affecting how performative "online gamer" identity can be enacted. On the official forum, huge debates have been sparked over the issue of whether to play solo, or in a group, with an emphasis on sociable play as part of being a "good" online gamer. Final Fantasy XIV places less emphasis on groups than Final Fantasy XI, apparently to reach a wider audience (Yoshida, 2011), yet this decision grated with many players who hold group play to be the best way to enjoy such a game. The below excerpt, from a forum thread entitled "The Solo Disease", is representative.

> I hate to be rude about this, but as much as I am for options. My question is why play mmorpg. I know several single player games with huge worlds Elder scrolls and fall out come to mind. Sure you have a r8ight to play mmorpg, but from my stance most solo-ist are rude. They come into mmorpg knowing the "point" is playing with others. The whine once they run into content that requires groups. I'm all for options, i'm all for allowing anyone to play. But a line should be drawn aat some point. When you join community games your suppose to be apart of that community. Which is what even well seasoned mmorpg'er forgot. (Post Date: 25th May 2011)

The solo player becomes a strange, abject gamer, who becomes the stereotypical lone gamer. Indeed as Nardi (2010) and Taylor (2006) point out, women are supposedly more attracted to such games because of the opportunities for socialising. In Sundén and Sveningsson's (2012) twin ethnography, Sveningsson found herself being labelled a "guild mom" in the straight guild she was part of, because she would normally keep the peace and make sure everyone was in good spirits. She also found

that self-defined male players would approach her about relationship problems and feelings, which she attributed to the notion that women are good listeners and more interested in being sociable than men. In a similar vein, I found myself being used as a sounding board by a few respondents asking about their relationships in-game. Though socialising may be perceived as a female preserve, gamers in groups still need to communicate effectively, as suggested above in the discussion of team work. Taylor (2006) particularly emphasises how the "power" gamers she studied were well networked, regularly sharing information through websites. In group battles, they also needed to be well co-ordinated, with each player understanding their role and demonstrating skill. Final Fantasy XIV players seem equally well-connected, and place importance on understanding the rules of social interaction. The next two chapters argue that the importance of group play and social interaction in Final Fantasy XIV shape the possibilities for identity performance, with the group prioritising authentic identities and sociable behaviour. These notions suggest that there are "correct" ways of playing the game, which also create players who believe that certain approaches are more appropriate than others. The next section thus turns to the importance of the avatar's position in space, partly in terms of adhering to gamer etiquette, and effectively showing skill in the game, with knowledge of both stemming from the gamer's history of play.

5.4 Gaming Etiquette: The Rules of Social Interaction, or Knowing Not to Step on Anyone's Toes

One of the other most popular topics on the forum concerned other players' manners when playing the game, entitled "Ethics and Manners for FF14 [Final Fantasy XIV]", and its opening post was as follows.

Yesterday I had a rather disturbing encounter with another player. I was crafting at the blacksmith guild, when a guy walked up to me. He was standing inside of my anvil.[29] It was annoying and it broke my consintration, but I didn't mind so i continued crafting. after four minutes of him standing their, he turned towards me and inched forward. So their i was kneeling while making brass rings, staring strait at his crotch!!!!!! I used rapid synth[30] to scrap the brass rings, And got out of their. Either he was being immature and taking screenshots, or he was just to stupid to realize wear he was standing. I am not angry at him if it is the latter. (Post Date: 2nd July 2011)

Earlier in this chapter, I pointed out that avatars are porous, which meant that talking to another player involves keeping a degree of personal distance to avoid intersecting another avatar, thus adhering to offline norms around embodiment. As this excerpt points out, standing inside another avatar is equated with being particularly rude, unless it occurs accidentally, much like stepping on someone else's toes. The problem here though is lag, which relates to how sometimes other avatars and scenery can be slow to load on to the screen. In my fieldnotes, I noted several times how the connection to the server seemed slow, which meant in some areas, other players were invisible for a time. Lag is also prevalent in other online games, and is considered an on-going annoyance (Boellstorff, 2008). In online worlds that require the use of avatars, the social norms inculcated through embodied knowledge remain important. Boellstorff (2008) noted that Second Life residents went as far as putting on classes for new players to become accustomed to different aspects of Second Life especially embodied etiquette. The following screenshot illustrates how strange it can look when overlaps between avatars happens suddenly.

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[29] When crafting as a blacksmith, the avatar will bang on an anvil with a hammer.
[30] When crafting, the process is referred to as synthesis, which the players shorten to synth.

Figure 25 When catching the boat, all of the avatars load into the same area, which can have odd looking consequences

In this screenshot, my avatar Rill had just boarded the ship he is standing on, which takes the player to the island of La Noscea from the mainland. All avatars appear in the same place, but their porous nature means they always intersect in strange ways. However, this is acceptable as standing inside another avatar is unavoidable since it is a glitch in the software. Lag sometimes causes such problems as well. The following two screenshots were taken 25 seconds apart, according to the timestamps, showing the effect of lag when arriving in a particular location.

Rill Farstrider

General | Battle

Piralnaut: Might this be the one you
    want?
Piralnaut: There are no more leves to
    select for this location.
Piralnaut: Good luck, and Twelve be
    with you.
S_____ _____ creates a dose of potent
medication.

HP   973   MP   241   TP   0

Figure 26 Taken 25 seconds apart, though my avatar Rill has moved slightly between them, Rill is standing in Limsa Lominsa, just outside the Adventurers' Guild, a popular meeting point at the time.

Thus transposing offline norms around embodiment to online spaces can be difficult, when faced with the added complications of technology. The two players in the foreground on the left-hand side are maintaining a distance from each other, as I have discussed above, yet before they actually appeared on my screen, it is possible that I could have simply run through them without knowing they were there. Indeed, they may have seen me do so, depending on their connection speed, since lag is partly caused by internet connection speed and PC power. It is interesting that players wish to maintain these offline norms in particular online, since it can be awkward to achieve proximity to one another, given such technical constraints. Bainbridge (2010) outlines some of the rules around behaviour towards others in World of Warcraft, yet to the players of many online games, including Final Fantasy XIV, these are taken for granted, since they have been internalised to the point where they do not need to be spoken. Players who fail to adhere to such embodied norms may face public shaming, like the above forum post. The most frequent accusation with these types of incidents is that the player is probably immature, or a child who does not understand what they are doing, returning us to the association of children with gaming generally. In the above forum post, the person in question was condemned for potentially being immature, however other forum threads showed a similar tendency. The thread which mentioned cybersex, discussed briefly in chapter four, pointed to a user referring to her personal experience. In the post in question, the user felt that sharing negative experiences around cybersex experiences were good for the "teens" reading the forum.

cybering[31] is a vile act that can lead down some scary roads. Like finding a stalker. Sorry but I didn't find OP[32] funny and I'm not enjoying the ho hum over pedophiles like they do not exist. Your obliviously a child and do not have real world experience.

If mods find it wrong hen they can mod change[33] it. I have everyright to use my experiences to teach a few smart mouth teens what the real world is like. I have no regreat with sharing my past if it can help keep someone safe. (Post Date: 12th May 2011)

This particular user had been quick to associate the act of cybersex with paedophiles, with other users suggesting that this was not necessarily the case. The original theme of the thread was a humorous attempt to put forward ideas to improve the game, including bikinis for female avatars so that they would look "cute", which this user held would attract paedophiles. However, this player assumes anyone with less experience (or at least a degree of ignorance) *must* be younger than themselves. Bainbridge (2010) also noted in chat logs that World of Warcraft players tended to equate players who made more mistakes with being teenagers. This relationship between age and insults is also interesting in light of the above discussion regarding the association of children with gaming. With online games, other studies have suggested that the average age for MMORPG players tends to be older, around 34 in many (Williams et al., 2008). The average age of my respondents was 28 for example. Though I could not claim that they were all mature, using age and immaturity as an insult with a population that could be considered sensitive to enjoying something associated with childhood seems harsh. Moreover, O'Brien

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[31] "Cybering" is another term for cybersex.
[32] OP stands for original poster and refers to whoever created the thread.
[33] Moderators can normally alter forum posts if they wish.

(2001) pointed to the problem of fewer physical cues altering online interaction, compared to face-to-face conversation, which was pointed out in chapter four. In this instance, knowledge is equated with age, and in an environment where the player's offline body is less visible, lacking knowledge remains associated with youth. Thus where the body is less visible, certain proxy signifiers lead players to make assumptions about each other (Kendall, 2000).

Similar signifiers are discussed in chapter six in relation to gender, as players claimed to be able to spot male players using female avatars through the ways in which they performed femininity. In both chapters two and three, Nakamura's (2002) work on cybertypes was discussed, where identity tourists would use a cybertype to create a particular online identity, evoking particular tropes, such as the passive exoticism of the geisha. To do so, signifiers are referred to in order to portray an identity stereotype to others textually. O'Brien (2001) put forward the notion that particular types of online space are, comparatively speaking, lower in "bandwidth" for communicating aspects of identity, so users rely more on identity cues that stem from existing stereotypes. Here, the association between gaming and children, and between young people and lack of knowledge, come together online and cause players to make assumptions about each other. This also frames the possibilities for performative identity in online games, as well as on the forums. Though the avatar is referred to on forums, to show off progress, the alteration in the mode of expression on forums, which are predominantly written, also affects authenticity. The shift away from the avatar as a means of interacting with others also entails a greater emphasis on authenticity. In the next section, I argue that players also develop ways of reading each other's' abilities in the same fashion, through the avatar.

5.5 Skill and Embodiment: The Avatar as a Body Project

Chapter three put forward the notion of the avatar as a body project, using the work of Shilling (2012), and this idea is revisited here through interview material and screenshots. As explained above, skill is valued and part of a display of knowledge about the game's mechanics. For example, when playing Final Fantasy XIV as a group against a hard enemy, each member takes different roles. A skilled performance is integral in such situations, or the player loses face. For some gamers, it is deeply important to portray themselves as good players (Taylor, 2006). A way of displaying such skill is through the avatar itself. The more powerful an avatar becomes, the better its equipment is. This forms part of the avatar's body project, with the skilful player looking to display this aspect of their identity externally. Taylor (2006) also notes how "power" gamers will do anything to get the best equipment and carefully analyse its benefits. The deployment of skill is also embodied as it relies on the player's reaction speed, and knowledge of the situation. Skill is displayed externally on the avatar, but remains subject to norms. A number of respondents, who portrayed themselves as skilled and knowledgeable, discussed judging others on the basis of the avatar's appearance. Cecil explained his opinion in an interview.

> Now that's just appearance [of the avatar]; as for the gear, I find that I will
> tend to make snap judgements on what a player's skill level probably is based
> on their gear. If I see a player wearing grossly outdated or inappropriate gear,
> I tend to assume that player is a bad player […] I find myself less likely to
> party with these types of people[34]. I also admit that my judgements can be

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[34] The group is called a party in the game, and players use the verb to party in the sense of joining up in a group with others.

critically harsh and unfair at times, but I also extend these judgements to myself. [Male, 26, Baltimore, Network Administrator]

In Final Fantasy XIV, each class has its own equipment and as the avatar becomes more powerful, it needs better equipment. This is commonly referred to as "gear" by players, and includes clothes and weapons. Thus "outdated gear" relates to lower level clothes or weapons used by avatars that are too high a level to make the most of it, or "inappropriate" means avatars using equipment that they are not good enough to use. Powerful avatars are a source of prestige in the community and a sign of a knowledgeable player. The avatar becomes a body project (Shilling, 2012) to display the knowledge they have gained. However, this knowledge also structures how players view others. "Hardcore" players defined themselves in a similar way to Taylor's (2006) "power" gamers, in that they prioritise reaching the hardest areas of the game, and gathering knowledge to make progress as quickly as possible. The self-defined "hardcore" players believe they can easily surmise who is less skilled through their appearance, as Cecil claimed. This also affects how they interact with that person. The body project is thus assessed critically by other players to see if they conform to particular standards, as emphasised by so-called "hardcore" players. The avatar as body project remains subject to particular norms, yet these are partly defined by the group, based on their experiences of gaming, thus the standards established in Final Fantasy XIV, and those drawn from Final Fantasy XI, among players from both. Particular gear is associated with making progress in the game, such as rare gear dropped in particular battles. As the player progresses through the game, the appearance of gear starts to look increasingly ornate, which is illustrated in the following screenshots, and players can check if an avatar is the right level and class to use it.

Figure 27 A range of different gear worn by Ferdy, my Lalafell avatar, the left-hand picture at a low level, the right-hand picture much later.

If they wish, players can demonstrate other observable facets of identity via the avatar's body project. In the course of this chapter, the avatar's ability to interact with others and the process of learning the relationship between avatar positioning and emoting was outlined as part of performative identity. Yet, the avatar's appearance also has an important role, by situating the player among peers, with the body project in the form of the avatar communicating aspects of the player's identity. Shilling (2012) pointed to the capacity of the body to demonstrate identity, through devices such as body modification. This process has become increasingly important in late modernity, as part of the growth of consumer culture. In many ways, the avatar follows a similar course, with players able to portray themselves as competent as well as following particular ways of representing themselves. For example, Montblanc suggested the following in an interview.

> Gear in every game is important to me. I like to look as good as I feel as I try to dress nicely in real life too. Unfortunately for FFXIV, I take it quite realistically, as some of my gear makes my Lalafell look great! But the stats and rank requirements aren't quite the best for practicality. [20, Male, Massachusetts, Disabled]

Other online worlds offer similar capacities, such as Second Life. Boellstorff (2008) has emphasised the myriad ways in which Second Life residents can dress their avatars, since anything can be created and sold. Second Life is thus filled with countless resident-run shops to cater for every taste. To this end, Second Life residents spend much of their time buying and creating objects. Montblanc's avatar is notable for being one of the dressier among the interviewees in his use of the avatar as a body project to convey his fashion sense. Most of the others agreed with Cecil, prioritising instrumental qualities in terms of gaining the most benefit in a

fight. In their way, both were attempting to communicate something about themselves to other players through their avatars – Montblanc concerning his dress sense, and Cecil's anxiety to appear to be a good player. Both recognised how their avatars were performing their identity in an embodied fashion, as much as any other performative act.

The player can use the avatar in two ways to enact performative identity: through their knowledge of emotes and positioning the avatar in space, and through the avatar as a body project to signify observable facets of identity. Both of these contribute as much to the performance of identity as any kind of verbal utterance. Once again, the links between offline and online life are growing by studying the ways in which players relate to the avatar. Similar norms around socialising and embodied knowledge persist with the avatar, and could even be considered more important given the porous nature of avatars. The next two chapters build on these points further, as the role of the avatar in this online identity becomes even more apparent.

5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown how performative identity can be enacted in online spaces. Firstly, social interaction is imperative if one wishes to be seen as a "real" person rather than an abject bot. Failing to respond to messages from other players is viewed as suspicious. Being able to communicate through the avatar is thus the keystone of performative identity, otherwise the player is not perceived to be human. To further add nuance to social interaction and prove a degree of skill as a player, the player must also be able to use emotes properly and at the right time. Players draw on embodied knowledge when using the avatar in social interaction,

and combine this with their typing skill to produce the desired effect. Depending on the race of the avatar in question, it may be more appropriate for more emotes to be used for example, to enact the performative identity expected from the audience in question. Players also use different registers to communicate, whether it means talking "as" the player, or in the voice of the avatar. All of these contribute to the enactment of performative identities.

Secondly, there is tension between the authentic approach to online identity (van Zoonen, 2013) explored in chapter three, and the meta-roleplay adopted by certain players. These interviewees studied aspects of their avatar and incorporated elements of meta-roleplay into their performative identity. Despite pressure from other players to conform to the notion of authentic identity, in terms of the avatar representing the player more directly in the game, meta-roleplay was claimed as an alternative way of enacting identity. Yet, it was argued that meta-roleplay could be seen as a way of countering the claim that gaming is just for children, and forms part of an attempt to resist being classified as a stereotypical lone gamer. In this sense, "being a gamer" plays a role in how performative identity can be enacted, as well as what kinds of performative identity are open to the player.

Thirdly, the socio-cultural context of this community is important, in terms of their gaming history and how this shapes their views on social interaction. As players like Barret and Penelo emphasise the importance of playing in a group, most prioritised finding a group of like-minded players to spend time with, if they had not already. If a player refuses to be sociable, they are seen as strange by other members of the community. Moreover, the rules of social interaction need to be adhered to by all players, otherwise they are framed as rude and disruptive. This ranges from being polite to others, to recognising the porousness of avatars and the role of embodied

knowledge. These notions are often unspoken, but form an important part of enacting performative identity, as these constrain how a player can behave if they wish to remain in groups.

Finally, it was argued that the avatar forms a body project for displaying skill to other players. Skill levels can be an important part of a player's identity and need to be signified to others. This concerns the appearance of the avatar, and the type of equipment that it uses. Like the consumer culture that enables the body project in offline spaces (Shilling, 2012), players are encouraged to buy new items for the avatar, or find them in the game. Alongside skilful performances in groups and timely use of emotes, the avatar body project represents another avenue for performative identity by signifying the player's skill to others. The avatar body is also read by other players to assess the player's ability. This also represents a contribution to sociological knowledge around the role of embodiment online, rather than perpetuating the idea that the internet is disembodied.

The next chapter takes these ideas around interaction and identity forward in relation to gender and sexuality. Performative identity is examined in the context of heteronormativity and its relationship to authentic identity. Unlike the existing research, the net is cast more widely in this chapter by considering avatar and player gender, and how heteronormativity constrains this. Players are in constant tension between either appearing authentic, to keep an authentic identity where player and avatar gender match, or doing otherwise and needing to claim a secure heterosexuality to keep up with heteronormativity. This is also examined in relation to how sexual norms are perpetuated in these spaces, such as homophobia, and the problem of excessive sexuality.

Chapter 6 Gender and Sexuality: Heteronormativity Online and the Effects on Performative Identity

This chapter concerns how performative online identity remains subject to heteronormativity. Chapter three outlined how heteronormativity shapes the possibilities for gender in everyday life and posited that it provides a useful conceptual tool for examining how gender and sexual norms pervade online spaces. This chapter examines the third research question, which relates to how particular norms are still pervasive online and the ways in which they constrain the possibilities for the enactment of identity. Chapter three also noted the link between the notion of authentic identity (van Zoonen, 2013) and heteronormativity. The second research question is also relevant for this chapter as it concerns the role of authentic identity in online spaces.

The previous chapter outlined how identity is "done" using an embodied avatar in Final Fantasy XIV. It argued that a consideration of performative identity entails exploring how players communicate with each other, both as players and as avatars, to enact identity. The collective gaming experiences of Final Fantasy XIV players was put forward to examine some of the group's specificities that also affect the enactment of identity in Final Fantasy XIV. This chapter shifts the focus towards gender and sexuality. Butler (1990) posited that performative identity is constrained by heteronormativity, that is the assumption of heterosexuality and enforcement of gender norms along particular lines. It is thus important to examine how heteronormativity is part of online spaces. Consequently, these norms shape the possibilities for online identity performance, coupled with the effect of authentic identity, which is bound up with heteronormativity.

Firstly, the chapter explores how players select a gender to gain some initial insights into the process of creating an avatar. This has been neglected in the literature, with most work on gender concerning either the presence (or absence) of women gamers, or the exoticisation of gender switching, as outlined in chapter two. Moreover, Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) point to how sexuality has not been addressed very well in the research either. Part of the problem lies in the focus on sexual activity in the existing research, which led Bainbridge (2010) to dismiss the possibility of considering sexual behaviour in online games. Yet, by seeking to examine the heteronormative aspect of gender in this online game, the relationship between gender and sexuality is pivotal to seeing how gendered norms are reproduced online. This is also related to how gender policing becomes a way of checking if players are authentic, in relation to the work of van Zoonen (2013), who suggests that an authentic identity is one where a single body holds a single identity. The avatar's embodiment is also shaped by the game design, with gendered notions shaping the possibilities of identity performance. This is examined through an analysis of screenshots, which point to the gendering of emotes, such as the "sit" emote. This section contributes to debates around the formation and persistence of gender in the face of gender norms from offline life, combined with those inculcated from the outset in the game.

The second section then turns to an examination of gender switching. One of the stereotypes yet to be analysed in this study is that of men who play as female avatar because they are "nicer to look at". Nardi (2010) took the assertion at face value that male players who played as female avatars objectified the avatar, with very little further deliberation, which is common in other works too. However, in the course of my interviews with Final Fantasy XIV players, they put forward a range of reasons

for gender switching, which deserve closer examination. Some of the self-defined male players stated that they felt more feminine in their demeanour and way of expressing themselves, so they were more comfortable playing as female avatars. Though they still expressed themselves within a binary view of gender, these players offer a different, more nuanced perspective on what leads players to switch genders within an environment that works to prevent such behaviour. Other examples also demonstrate how players try to stay within the heteronormative framework. This section explores how heteronormativity remains prevalent online. By unpacking how gender can be "done" in online games, this study contributes to sociological understandings of gender norms in online spaces. Rather than upholding the view that gender is static between online and offline life, this also suggests a degree of leeway with experimentation with gender, and the ways in which players "read" gender in different spaces, such as lower bandwidth forums and higher bandwidth online games.

The final section is concerned with gender and the official forum in particular, which is run by the game's developers, and was observed for nearly six months. Players make a range of claims about avatar gender, whether they feel it needs to be congruent with their offline self, or a way of experimenting, though the community shows hostility towards the latter. This discussion also highlights how gender is held to be a signifier of authentic identity, while gender experimentation is perceived as deceptive. Certain threads concerning gender demonstrate these tendencies, such as a lengthy thread regarding the possibility of adding the so-called "missing genders" to the races that were originally mono-gendered, and another offering the players' thoughts on a possible wedding service. These threads point to the relationship between heteronormativity and the way players integrate it into online spaces leading

to a policing of gender and sexuality. Valkyrie (2012) suggested that female avatars are harassed for proof of their "true" sex, partly due to the effects of the above-mentioned stereotype of self-defined male players using female avatars. Yet, the previous chapter also suggested that authenticity remains in tension with the possibilities afforded by meta-roleplay. To this end, this section further illustrates this, by showing the community's emphasis on ensuring authentic identity performances and interactions with regard to avatar gender in particular.

6.1 Maintaining a Gender: Players' Explanations of Congruent Avatar Gender

In the interviews, one of the main questions concerned how the players originally created their avatar in Final Fantasy XIV. Avatar creation could be perceived as a performative act, setting in motion this particular identity performance. This is intended in the sense put forward by Butler (1990), who cited the linguist Austin's interpretation of performativity. The nature of statements and acts can change according to context. Avatar creation is a performative act, in the sense that it enacts an identity in a space within its normative framework. Furthermore, such acts continue throughout the period of play, which create a superficially stable identity. This section examines how players select gender in particular. Some respondents offered a fairly straightforward answer in interviews concerning their avatar's gender, like Montblanc.

> When creating my avatar, Gender is very important to me. I feel very disconnected when playing an avatar of the opposite gender, as I like to see myself in my own avatar and create it as more of a personification of how I see myself personality wise. [20, Male, Massachusetts, Disabled]

Montblanc's comments, which were also echoed by other respondents, suggest a relationship between gender and an authentic identity performance, where the avatar is not necessarily perceived as a separate entity, but an extension of the player into this space. Van Zoonen's (2013) work highlights the assumption that a single identity resides in a single body. It could be argued that gender becomes a marker of such an attitude, thus a player continues a congruent gender online. For some, the need to be authentic in this portrayal of their "true" self led them to maintain their gender online, as part of the performance. The self-defined female players of Final Fantasy XIV took a slightly different approach, placing greater emphasis on the embodiment of the female avatars afforded by the game design. In this way, a more authentic performance could be sustained in a less sexualised embodiment compared to other online games. Rinoa also played as an avatar that matched her own sex and explained her choice in an interview.

> I will always play as a woman when available, there simply aren't enough under-sexualized women characters in video games these days. I like to break that tradition. [27, Female, California]

None of the self-defined female players among my respondents switched gender in this particular game, though a few had in the past, or knew others who had. The fact remains that self-defined female players may feel uneasy about being represented by an avatar that is overly sexualised. Taylor (2006) and Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) both expressed disquiet about the representation of female avatars in other games. In the former, self-defined female players disliked the appearance of many of the female avatars in EverQuest, with many either opting to play despite the appearance, or using a Gnome or Dwarf because they were seen as less curvaceous, as other races had overly large breasts and bottoms (Taylor, 2006). Moreover, the

equipment for such avatars was seen as demeaning, with chainmail armour being reduced to chainmail bikinis for example. In the latter, self-defined queer players also selected less curvaceous avatars, favouring female Troll avatars in World of Warcraft for example, who are thinner and more bestial (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012). In Final Fantasy XIV, the self-defined female players in my study held that the female avatars offered an appearance that was much more like an everyday woman rather than a fantasy object. The appearance of the avatar is also important to players with regards to performative identity. At the heart of this issue is how avatars are gendered in advance by the game designer. Though the female avatars in Final Fantasy XIV are less sexualised, the ways in which the avatar *itself* can perform gender in an embodied fashion are set out in advance in the game's design. As a result, gender is still inculcated in other ways through the body of the avatar without the player realising. This can be seen in how different avatars sit.

6.2 The Sit Emote: Gendering the Avatar and "Girling the Girl"

Butler (1990) emphasises that gender is "taught" implicitly from a young age. Both Butler (1990) and Hayles (1999) point to the importance of how children are taught to sit differently, with girls being reminded to sit with their legs together. The gendering of avatars persists via the game's design, which is shown through a series of screenshots to illustrate this point. In gaming terms, "sit" has a useful function, as it allows the avatar to recover health after fighting, though players in Final Fantasy XIV also use it to symbolise that they are away from the keyboard (afk). Gendered assumptions are perpetuated by the game designers though, meaning that some aspects of gender remain unavoidable, no matter what type of performance is undertaken by the player. This can be seen in how the different avatars sit in the following screenshots.

Figure 28 My avatar Rill sitting to regain health in La Noscea

Figure 29 Avatars sitting in Limsa Lominsa

Figure 30 Avatars sitting in Ul'dah

Figure 31 Detail version.

Figure 32 Detail version.

The first screenshot in this set showed my avatar Rill sitting. Both of the others were taken in common areas for avatars to gather, which were discussed in chapter four regarding participant observation in a game. The next screenshot shows groups of avatars sitting just outside the Adventurers' Guild in Limsa Lominsa, and a particular group is highlighted in the detail version. On the far left, three Lalafell sit together, then towards the right, a Miqo'te (with pink hair) and a male Hyur (wearing

tan trousers and a helm). I noted above that sitting can be used to signify a player is away from the keyboard. If a player needs to go away from the computer to attend to something else, it is common practice to leave the avatar out of the way of others, and normally sitting down. This can also be seen in the third screenshot, where the main street in Ul'dah is used for the same purpose, and another group is similarly highlighted in the detail version. What is also noticeable is that the avatars are positioned deliberately with their backs against the wall, rather than in the middle of the thoroughfare, which also follows from the point raised in the last chapter around how porous avatars are.

In addition to these poses, but not pictured, the Roegadyn sit with their legs crossed, male Elezen sit the same way as the male Hyur, and female Hyur and Elezen hug their knees like the Lalafell. Avatars still sit in gendered ways. The Lalafell look decidedly child-like and thus seem to be the only race to buck the trend, by not adhering to particular gender norms. Other male avatars, including the Hyur and Elezen, look much more laidback in comparison. The Miqo'te look demure as a female-only race. Though the player's performance of gender is important, and is discussed in the remainder of this chapter, the game's design sets certain aspects of avatar gender as concrete and unchangeable. The previous chapter suggested how emotes can be recast by players to signify other gestures, depending on the context. In relation to gender, the player's performance can only go so far, and cannot affect such pre-emptive gendering. Final Fantasy XIV is certainly different in terms of avatar appearance compared to other games, but the regulation of gendered bodies continues regardless. Feminists have paid close attention to how women's bodies are rendered docile through discourse and the constant need for improvement and transformation (Budgeon, 2003), and this is perpetuated in game design. Following

Butler (1990), gendering as a process takes place in many ways, not just through appearance, but the embodiment of gender. While a game designer may seem to be breaking with sexualised avatars, leading to claims from self-defined female players that they feel more comfortable with these female avatars, gendering continues in other ways.

Nevertheless, the literature in this area focuses on the appearance of avatars only, without considering how other gender norms are perpetuated in games. This also reflects how stereotypes are present in games. Chapters two and three examined how this was especially the case with text-based spaces, where stereotypes were easier to evoke online (O'Brien, 2001). This section contributes to the debates around gender formation and how it is perpetuated online in various ways. Gender is often policed from an early age through correction on a regular basis (Shapiro, 2010), though women are able to work on the corporeal body to reflect or challenge gender norms (Budgeon, 2003). Some gendered norms and stereotypes remain more static for the embodied avatar because of embodied knowledge. Hayles (1999) puts forward the idea that embodied knowledge is less open to change because it is subconscious, due to repetition. In effect, these particular norms around gender remain more deeply entrenched in online games because it is what we expect to see. Nevertheless, certain self-defined male players suggested that they could still "fool" others into believing they were "women" through their avatar and their performative identity. The respondents discussed in the following section point to how gender norms can be resisted in online games in various ways through the avatar.

6.3 "… if you never met me before I am 99% confident I could make you believe I was female", Gender Switching in Final Fantasy XIV Among Self-Defined Male Players

Among my respondents, offline gender was divided into 80 per cent self-defined male players, and 20 per cent self-defined female players. Yet, when looking at the gender of avatars, the ratio was nearly 50:50. Surveys of other games, such as Williams et al. (2008), have also suggested similar figures for both player gender and avatar gender. This can be attributed, in my study, to self-defined male players who have female avatars. There is a stereotype that remains to be unpacked – that of the heterosexual man who plays as, but also objectifies, a female avatar. In the gaming community, this has been a cause for consternation, and men who do so can be derided. However, the notion has become ingrained, to the point where female avatars are sometimes pushed for proof that they are offline ("real") women (Valkyrie, 2012). Some players offered their own observations, such as Cecil who went as far as saying the following in an interview.

> When I meet players with male characters, I tend to assume they are male.
>
> For female characters, if the race is female only (e.g. Mithra or Miqo'te) or if the race's females are significantly more attractive that the males […] then I tend to assume the player is male as well.
>
> If the character is female and plain looking […] then I assume that the player is female. [26, male, Baltimore, USA]

This underscores the objectification aspect of the stereotype, with particular notions of beauty structuring how the embodiment of an avatar is perceived by players. This

is also mirrored in the research discussed above, when Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) explored how self-defined queer players deliberately used "ugly" Troll avatars, or Nardi's (2010) confusion when she realised that the shapely female Night Elves were associated with self-defined male players. This also taps into the above discussion concerning the self-defined female players who did not like the sexualised avatars in other games. The stereotype has become so embedded in online gaming culture that a curvaceous female avatar is often assumed to be a man, which results in harassment for proof. The performance perceived to accompany such "obvious men" is characterised as almost aggressively sexual towards male avatars in particular, living up to a role of fantasy. At the same time, self-defined female players occupy an unusual position. Taylor (2012) points to the "booth babe" at gaming exhibitions, who are used in a similar way to women draped over the bonnet of high-end sports cars, but in the booths of game developers to attract attention. In contrast, she notes that the female nerdy gamer is likelier to be viewed as an asexual friend, who cannot compete with the glamorous "booth babe". In regard to online games, the female avatar is treated much like the "booth babe", with the belief that the "woman" behind the avatar is more "booth babe" than female nerd. Moreover, the notion that "real" women are still a rarity in gaming also contributes to these perceptions around female avatars. Consequently, a few of the self-defined male players I interviewed expressed discomfort with the idea of playing as a female avatar, like Kain.

> I always, ALWAYS play a male. All my avatars reflect me. I feel uncomfortable playing a woman, and I absolutely despise the idea that "if you're going to spend hours staring at a butt, might as well make it a woman's." It feels disrespectful. [Male, 25, Australia]

Although this stereotype has become widely known in online gaming, it remains problematic for self-defined male players to admit to adhering to it. At the same time, this justification appears to be the most prominent explanation given. Butler (1990) holds that sex and gender need to match as far as a heteronormative identity performance is concerned. Thus, using interview data, I argue that the only way for these self-defined male players to secure their masculinity in a heteronormative environment is to proclaim that they switch gender to objectify the avatar, especially given how gender is policed in this particular online space, and how the masculinity of self-defined male players is often called into question (Thornham, 2011). Moreover, this is the only way of perpetuating the notion of authentic identity. If an authentic identity is where a single identity resides in a single body (van Zoonen, 2013), by claiming to objectify the avatar, rather than experiment with identity, the avatar cannot be seen as an extension of the player, but a separate entity that only exists to be objectified.

In the course of the interviews, two ideas were put forward by self-defined male players who have a female avatar. The first, and more common, was that a female avatar represented their offline personality and identity better, though some still felt uneasy about how they were perceived by other players, who could be potentially offended by their decision as a result of the stereotype, as suggested by Kain above. It could be argued that the gender these men perform offline does not match their sex, so as far as their avatars are concerned, they are actually trying to keep their gender congruent with their avatar, rather than their sex and the gender of the avatar like the respondents mentioned above. In the following, the accounts of certain self-defined male players are examined in light of their claims to being "feminine men", which shaped their avatar gender. They implicitly challenge heteronormativity as

outlined by Butler (1990), thus becoming open to symbolic violence from other players, unless they justify their decision through a secure heterosexuality, and fetishise the avatar. The second was presented more from a meta-roleplay perspective, where one player suggested female avatars could be more emotionally expressive, which allowed him to interact with others in a different way. All of them showed concern for the issue of authenticity and gender in various ways, recognising that the community would not necessarily look upon them favourably, but still preferred female avatars regardless.

A typical example of the first idea can be found in Cloud's account.

> I'm 24, Born Male, Gender Dysphoric (or Gender Queer though I don't like that term usually), Work in IT/Healthcare… Right now its [using an Elezen avatar] just my best choice but it doesn't feel the same which is why I'm so public about requesting the Female Roegadyn as an option. Elezen females seem to dainty for me all of the races do now. As I identify more readily as female emotionally more then I do male, I chose to display myself with a Female Character. [24, gender dysphoric, Florida]

Cloud only ever used female avatars in other games too, and discussed experimenting at the start of each game to find the right one for him[35], especially in terms of size. Here he claims that the Elezen are dainty, though they are the tallest female avatars. Their predecessors, the Elvaan, in Final Fantasy XI were more muscular. Since starting in Final Fantasy XIV, he had tried various female avatars, and found that he could not settle properly on an avatar as none of them "felt" right. As a result, he became a vocal proponent of adding female Roegadyn avatars to the

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[35] Cloud uses male pronouns to refer to himself in the interview.

game, who are discussed in more detail later. I asked if he had considered using a male Roegadyn until any possible change, and he replied that he would feel even less comfortable with that. The enactment of performative identity through his avatar was bound up with its gender, which was related to Cloud's gender dysphoria. He defined himself as born male but emotionally female, which meant that a female avatar seemed more "natural". Much like the players who had an avatar with a gender that matched the player's sex, Cloud had a similar ambition in mind when creating his avatar, in terms of matching gender. Squall expressed a similar disposition in an interview.

> People will treat me a different way until they find out; the ironic thing is that even after I reveal myself to be a male, people will still think I am a female. I still have friends from FFXI that if you asked, they'd tell you that I couldn't possibly have been a guy playing a female character […] meanwhile, you'll sometimes find the obvious guys playing female avatars (as you'll see them be really girly-girl, which I've found the typical female gamer isn't interested in) […] I'm not at all sure what it is, maybe it's just that I don't go around shoving genders into everyone's face. I've seen at some points where a male playing a female character would be asking for a favor in a fairly seductive manner so they won't have to pay it back. [27, Male, Savannah, Georgia]

Squall generally had a more feminine demeanour, thus making the decision to opt for female avatars as they were more "natural". Like Cloud, Squall had created an avatar with the aim of matching gender, rather than sex. Other respondents also noted how "obvious" self-defined men playing as female avatars would behave in a hyper-feminine, seductive way towards others, thus using a series of performative enactments to portray themselves as ultra-feminine. In other words, a highly

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sexualised performance of gender becomes a trigger for how players perceive the avatar in question. Without the sexualised performance, the player's gender becomes less visible in the interaction, leading other players to assume that the avatar offers a coherent matching of sex and gender. The hyper-sexualisation of avatars also relates to the performance of gendered identity, as well as the avatar's embodiment. These self-defined male players suggest that hyper-sexualisation is not needed, and it could be possible to perform gender differently online. Indeed, Squall holds his performance is credible to others because he does not make gender an "issue", though it could be argued that his gendered performance is less sexualised than the expectation from the stereotype. For some, the emphasis on authentic identity is overly troubling as they feel dishonest when switching gender, such as Tidus' experiences of playing Final Fantasy XI and Final Fantasy XIV, who spoke about his personal history as it intertwined with his passion for online gaming. He described himself as being a bisexual man, but "pretty feminine" in terms of gender, and had mostly used female avatars in online games. In Final Fantasy XIV, he still uses a female avatar, though this is integrated into his roleplay narrative.

> FFXI came in a time of a lot of real life drama, being 14-15 and all. Lots of fights with my dad (who eventually divorced my mom), school going horrible, etcetera. As such, when I got home, I started up FFXI and played till late nights, often till 2-3am (which is LATE when youre 14. But I was more sneaky than my parents were smart >:3). Also around that time, maybe a bit earlier I also met a group of friends who I hung around with a lot, these two things pretty much 'got me through my youth'. […]
>
> I did use the game as a form of escapism back then, and it was not until 4 years after I started playing that I told people I was actually a guy. Why I was

afraid to tell for so long I still don't know. I did however, totally love all the attention I got from guys. Not for the gifts or anything, just the fact that I was liked meant a lot to me. Now that I think about it, I think that urge lessened the more real-live friends I got over the years. Unlike back then, nowadays I'm actually quite the popular and social guy. [21, Male, Student, Utrecht, Holland]

The demand for an authentic identity caused a dilemma for Tidus, to the point where in Final Fantasy XIV he now deliberately tells friends and members of the Linkshells he plays in that he is not an offline woman. However, given that he participates in roleplay, this may not be deemed so problematic by other players, since roleplay encourages a more imaginative and creative approach to playing online games.

Nevertheless, though their gender may indeed match both online and offline, the emphasis on authentic identity demanded by the community means there is pressure for such players to announce themselves to the friendship group in good time, so that no-one is "fooled" (Valkyrie, 2012). The stereotype limits the possibilities for gender online. It frames particular ways of being gendered as appropriate, according to heteronormativity, and in the absence of sex and gender congruence, the player needs to compensate by emphasising they are either honest by announcing their "real" sex to friends, or assuredly heterosexual. Given the above discussion regarding gender being policed to ensure authenticity (Valkyrie, 2012), individuals are pressured to be open about their gender, or face being tested by other players. However, Squall noted above how others may disbelieve such a declaration if the performance of gender is not perceived as problematic, if they differ from those "obvious" men who behave in a hypersexual manner as a female avatar. Another

player, Cait Sith, offered a different approach to performing gender online, which is informative for this study.

6.4 The Performance of Two Genders: One Player, Two Avatars

Cait Sith offered an interesting account of his play. Unlike the above respondents, for whom gender was more important than biological sex, Cait Sith always used two avatars in any online game he played, one female and one male. He explained how this started for gaming reasons, such as differentiating between them, and benefiting from the help freely offered to female avatars, but over time developed into something more meaningful, where the female avatar offered a means of expressing himself more emotionally than he could otherwise. The male avatar is a fighter, and the female avatar is a crafter who makes money for the pair. Cait Sith told me how he viewed the two in an interview.

> My avatar definitely influences the way I play, I play my characters more along the lines of how I think they would act if they were real. As far as my lalafell, I refer to myself as female, act more feminine, etc. Is their an ulterior motive? Sure. Females generally get treated better on MMO[RPG]s than males (hmmm wonder why...) and in general will get things free. Do I RP [roleplay] with other people sexually? No, however, if they want to lust after a made-up persona I won't burst thier bubble since thier ignorance is making them happy. I guess it may be wrong to use people like that, but it happens everyday in real life too so I guess I dont feel guilty.
>
> My male Hyur I play as myself, nothing made up, perosnal stories, background, etc all accurate. And I keep them disassociated from each other

to. Different Linkshells, different friends. Idk [I don't know], it's just how I play. [27, Male, Indiana]

Cait Sith took a different approach, compared to Squall and Tidus. Rather than declaring himself to be a man to friends of the female avatar, he did not seem to react in the same way to the demands about authenticity. Instead, he held that the Lalafell was part of a meta-roleplay approach, which included using an avatar whose gender did not match his own. This can be seen in his claim about imagining how they would behave if they were "real". Consequently, he acted in a more feminine manner with the Lalafell avatar, which ties into Auron's and Barret's descriptions of meta-roleplay examined in the previous chapter. At the same time, Cait Sith recognises how his avatar would be perceived by others in the game, and the feeling that it would be better if they did not know the "truth", while admitting that he benefited from using a female avatar. I asked how he performed as this avatar, and if anyone had ever guessed that he had two avatars.

No they don't unless they actually know me in RL [real life] already, then they do, but I usually ask them to play along, and no one is the wiser, in fact it usually adds more credibility [to each avatar], I even had my girlfriend chat on Ventrillo and TeamSpeak [these are programs like Skype used by gamers to talk online] before as "me". I think I am quite successful, there are actually a lot of -real- females that play MMO[RPG]s, and by studying posts on forums from them, and studying patterns in attitude, tone of their sentencing, the way the type (vs. how they might talk), use of emoticons, acronyms, etc, if you never met me before I am 99% confident I could make you believe I was female. It helps of course that the average male wishes for a female friend to play online with, so this helps, as they are already quite susceptible

to the ruse. (Wow, I really sound like a scoundrel when I talk about it to someone else... lol?[laugh out loud]) [27, Male, Indiana]

In order to authenticate gender, certain requests are made of the player from friends or acquaintances. Valkyrie (2012) points out that either photographic or vocal proof is required to verify the gender identity of the player. Thus, a player can be asked for a photograph of "themselves", though Boellstorff (2008) has pointed to an incident he came across where a Second Life resident sent a picture to a friend claiming it was him, but in fact it was a photo he found on the internet. If the player wishes, it is possible to challenge the process. As far as voice is concerned, the player speaks via Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) programs like Skype or Ventrilo, which can thus be subverted in the way outlined by Cait Sith. Given the claims about authentic identity outlined in the previous chapter, the above suggests that authenticity can be troubled given the dependency on potentially unreliable measures. Returning to O'Brien's (2001) notion regarding bandwidth and communication, ultimately an authentic online identity does not necessarily exist. Van Zoonen (2013) emphasises how biometric passports attempt the same thing: tying identity to particular physical characteristics. These are also sometimes unsuccessful, such as using fingerprint scanning, which fails with manual labourers whose fingerprints have been worn down by years of work (ibid.). Attempts to authenticate identity that depend on embodiment can be unreliable, both online and offline.

Cait Sith also emphasises the importance of performativity in his play, and the belief that self-defined women speak differently online compared to men. Some research has suggested that women enjoy such online games more because they enjoy socialising (Taylor, 2006), and that women's role in guilds often becomes that of peacekeeper and negotiator (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012). Squall also discussed

the way that he speaks in terms of being "gender-less", or not behaving in a hyper-feminine manner. Cait Sith claimed he had examined how players he assumed to be women speak on forums, evoking similar ideas around women being sociable, and expressing emotions more readily. Research on different aspects of computer-mediated communication also suggest that these assumptions are pervasive online (Herring and Martinson, 2004). Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) note that particular ideas about women are perpetuated online, which limit the possibilities for self-defined female players. Cait Sith's interview suggests that the lack of bandwidth encourages the reliance on stereotypes online (O'Brien, 2001), when players imagine what others are like offline. In the previous chapter, the association between youth and knowledge was discussed, with players assuming that a lack of knowledge meant that the other player *must* be young. Ways of speaking are considered in gendered terms, which also transfers into online spaces (Herring and Martinson, 2004), leading players to make assumptions about offline gender primarily based on particular aspects of the performances. With Cait Sith, in the absence of photographic proof and presence of misleading vocal "proof" supplied by his partner, other players only had other aspects of his performance, primarily the speech of the avatar, through which he believed he could mimic the stereotypes around how women allegedly speak. Yet, Cait Sith put forward an interesting idea when I asked about the appearance of his avatars, and if he felt it had an effect on how he played each one.

> I like my lalafell, it's like an image of my inner child I guess, small, cute, innocent. I try to stay practical with gear on her, but I keep a set of gear for just hanging out in. On my Hyur I try to kep him geared practically, but still in some kind of armor i like.. I have turned down a slightly better piece of

gear, just because it looked downright ridiculous...lol and I actually tried my best to make my hyur look like me too. THought it was funny, if i got a haircut and worked out a little bit I could pull it off i think!

I think it has to do with my mindset while I am playing her. I feel a bit younger, and as such more open to emotional expression. There is only so much emotion you can convey to someone by just typing characters into a box. I definitely get deeper into the RP [roleplay] aspect of the game on my Lalafell.

Though he wondered if his approach could be construed as problematic, it seems playing the game with two avatars gave him an outlet to express himself in different ways. However, he also relies on this limited means of expression to successfully continue with two avatars in the way he described. Both the race and gender of the Lalafell avatar enabled Cait Sith to be emotionally expressive, in a way that he did not with his male avatar. At the same time, he recognises the limited nature of the possibilities of interaction in a space with lower levels of "bandwidth", where only a certain amount of emotional content can be expressed via emotes. In this particular instance, Cait Sith's approach to his two avatars illustrates how the avatar embodiment enables particular performances of identity. This study has argued that the avatar is partly a body project (Shilling, 2012) to signify identity in various ways, such as the discussion of skill in the previous chapter, but also integral to performative identity, which is particularly apparent here with Cait Sith. When he talks in these terms, he also points to an interesting sensorial element. Dovey and Kennedy (2006) have written about the relationship between embodiment and gaming in terms of sensorial feedback loops, where the player is prodded into action by the events unfolding on the screen. Yet Sundén and Sveningsson (2012) have

taken this idea further into exploring the relationship between affect, emotion and online gaming, especially in Sundén's sections of the ethnography. As such, Cait Sith holds that the Lalafell avatar makes him feel younger, more expressive, and he often described her behaviour as being cute. To some extent, the relationship between online and offline goes both ways, with the avatar encouraging creative play as well as permitting access to a way of interacting with others that the player does not necessarily explore elsewhere.

Nardi (2010) emphasised how the male players she encountered promoted a macho discourse in a "boys' tree house", in which self-defined female players need to go with the flow to be seen as "one of the boys". However, this can be seen in a new light through the account of Cait Sith. Sveningsson's part of the twin ethnography noted how self-defined male players approached her to talk about sensitive, relationship matters away from the masculine discourse that crowds the rest of the chat (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012). In effect, the gendering of discourse does not necessarily have to be this way. On the one hand, the hyper-masculine discourse could be partly attributed to the same tendencies outlined by Thornham (2011), who notes how male players strive to distance themselves from the lonely male gamer stereotype, with these self-defined male online gamers perpetuating a misogynistic discourse to protect their masculinity and avoid association with the stereotype. However, with regard to the avatar's gender, a degree of it could be due to meta-roleplay, emphasising how players use their avatar in different ways to interact with others. Like the self-defined male players who perform in a hyper-feminine, sexualised fashion as a female avatar, those using a male avatar may undertake a similarly hyper-masculine performance, which becomes a necessity in a lower bandwidth environment, where fewer cues exist to read another person's identity.

Consequently, to maintain heteronormativity, a hyper-masculine performance is also necessary to emphasise a secure heterosexual masculinity. Cait Sith suggests this does not have to be the case, though experimentation means that a degree of openness with others must be sacrificed. The next section moves on to the game's official forum, which at times exemplifies the tensions between authentic identity and meta-roleplay, as well as how heteronormative values are integrated in such spaces.

6.5 Heteronormativity in the Official Forum: Authenticity or Meta-Roleplay?

Certain threads on the official forum were concerned with gender and sexuality. One of the noticeable qualities of the official forum is that moderators do not necessarily prevent particular types of discussion taking place, as noted in chapter four. Many forums for online gaming actively prevent players talking about sexuality. Following a series of arguments around erotic roleplay (ERP) and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) guilds in World of Warcraft, many online game forums banned certain search terms, such as "gay", "ERP" and others, which is covered by their filters (kaolian, 2010). The official forum for Final Fantasy XIV does not include such measures, which represents an important opportunity for research.

Valkyrie (2011) alludes to how heteronormativity emphasises authenticity in intimate relationships online, and in turn leads to scrutiny of gender to avoid homosexual encounters. On the Final Fantasy XIV forum, one post offered the following example.

> I knew a guy (lets call him Mr. X) in FFXI who was hitting on this girl which was really a guy and myself and other guys knew that… just for fun we told our friend (the guy who played the female char[acter]) to play along, 2-3

month Mr. X thought he was going out with her [in-game]… and we found on vent[36] it was actually a guy… Mr. X never showed up again since then… lol.

In FFXIV we have another guy who thought he was going out with a girl but actually was a guy… it last 4 month lol at least this guy didn't quite the game lol he changed LS and never talks to her (him) now lolol. (Post Date: 29th July 2011)

This example divided players replying to this thread, with some finding it funny, whereas others felt the deception involved was too much. Both of the apparently male players believed that they were engaged in "real" relationships with "real" women, but were publicly humiliated by others who were "in on the joke". The previous section noted the emotional side of gaming that links the player to the avatar, but emotional relationships with others can be complex. The humiliation seems to evoke disgust in the players concerned, who then shun their former social circle. Such behaviour also makes players seek some form of proof of gender, though earlier in this chapter, it was suggested that such proof could be subverted if a player were so minded such as Cait Sith. However, this also illustrates Valkyrie's (2011) point about how gender switching is deemed problematic when sexual behaviour is included in the analysis. Valkyrie (2011) originally wondered if sexuality would become more pliable online, with less focus on "true" gender, with the avatar providing an alternate focal point. However his findings suggested that this was not the case. Instead, normative sexuality remains in place, with the body of the player at the focus and heteronormative gender. With this example from the Final Fantasy XIV forum, the performative aspect is interesting, since these players must

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[36] Ventrilo, the Skype-like voice software for online games.

have successfully performed as "women", though without further details, it is hard to know how this was achieved. Nevertheless, the link between offline and online norms can be seen, especially in terms of constraining sexuality, and a continuing emphasis on authenticity to avoid duplicity. This can be seen further in another thread.

When New York passed a law allowing same-sex marriage in July 2011, a thread appeared concerning the addition of a wedding service to the game. Many online games offer a form of wedding service, including World of Warcraft and Second Life. In Final Fantasy XI, weddings were possible, but only between two avatars that were not of the same gender. The opening post of the thread proposed adding weddings, but only if an avatar could marry anyone they wished. As mentioned frequently in this chapter, players do not always have an avatar whose gender matches their offline sex. Thus potentially, weddings are less straightforward, such as an online marriage between a male player and female player with two male avatars, or two female players with two female avatars and so on. However, the thread quickly became argumentative. Initially, the debate concerned whether players would be able to marry other races, such as a Lalafell and a Miqo'te. Certain players then began debating homosexuality. One player commented:

> I can see it now gay parade in ul'dah :/ its just all wrong in my view. […]
>
> My father brought me up to be if you say anti-gay and his father did the same. And i'll bring up my kids the same way, its just the way my family is. (Post Date: 14th July 2011)

This player conflates a same-gender avatar marriage with the offline version. Despite the potential for more flexible attitudes towards gender and sexuality (Valkyrie,

2011), normative approaches to both remain in online games, hence any type of marriage is subject to the same norms in the minds of players. Other players expressed their annoyance towards this player's attitude, as well as noting that roleplayers like to have the option to marry others, in keeping with their narrative.

Such outright homophobic attitudes have come under scrutiny in the gaming media more recently (e.g. Scimeca, 2012), yet the academic research has neglected this problem. For example, despite being called "fag" and "homo" by other players while researching World of Warcraft, which was visible in the chatlogs he published, Bainbridge (2010) did not comment about the casual homophobia present in these remarks. Sundén (2009) discusses the debate around the advertisement of an LGBT World of Warcraft guild, and its developers' initially hostile reaction, though this was later retracted. Overall, there has been less discussion of sexuality compared to gender or race/'race' in online gaming (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012). Yet, this attitude also underscores the role of heteronormativity, and the way in which existing offline norms around sexuality are continued in online spaces. Though this study has attempted to outline the socio-cultural context of players, ranging from their gaming history, to their personal lives, the community is far from homogenous in its values and outlook. This becomes more obvious as more of this thread is discussed, with greater levels of homophobia from one player who was in direct conflict with others. This further example demonstrates how homophobia can also signify the desire to control the game space, much like the work of Grosz (2001), who held that virtual reality enabled an escapist control fantasy, which leads to the claim that participants can ignore social norms, as examined in chapter three. In effect, the escapism claimed by these online gamers causes some to exclude "reality" in order to privilege the game above offline life.

This player voiced their objection in a rather strange fashion. In an overly long post, C. claimed that homosexuality is the result of promiscuity, childhood trauma caused by family breakdown and hormone problems. After a lengthy conservative, homophobic diatribe, the post closes with the following.

> For myself personally, I would rather not have to deal with homosexual issues while playing a game that I'm trying to relax and have fun with. Putting my practicality aside and going to my personal feelings, the very thought turns my stomach. If there is constant stomach turning by various players of various personal thoughts on the issue, there's always a chance it won't keep them playing long.

> Now I know you could say, "well maybe heterosexuality turns mine", but the reality is that heterosexuality is the normal way of things. For the sake of humanity, it had better stay that way. I know it sounds mean, but it is the truth. (Post Date: 15th July 2011)

Many players posted replies pointing out two problems. The first is that other players may not perceive game marriage as having the same meaning as offline marriage, so players should not be so angry. The second stemmed from gay players attempting to debunk the post while expressing outrage at its tone. However, C. later replied, restating a belief in homosexuality as a genetic mutation, and simultaneously denying evolution. Other players were quick to point out the existence of gay players on all servers regardless.

The majority of the thread continued like this, with a handful of players objecting to weddings more broadly, and the rest mostly in favour. Yet, only a few made posts like these.

Though in XI it's for opposite sex partners only and it pretty much sux. I'd hate to see them pull a bigoted move like that again, especially since XIV is full of sexual references everywhere, straight or gay, and some of them are quite racy may I add >_> I'd rather have no marriage at all than witnessing this all over again.

It screws over the whole community as people roleplaying an opposite sex of their real life get cut out too. What about all the straight guys trapped in Miqo'te bodies? (Post Date: 16th July 2011)

Following the remark about sexual references, the American content rating system flags the game as "Teen" rated and mentions the presence of "sexual themes" on the box. Therefore, the game does not actually avoid mentions of sex or sexual behaviour, as this post also points out. The following screenshot demonstrates how the dialogue of one character can be quite flirtatious at times when addressing the player's avatar, regardless of the avatar's gender.
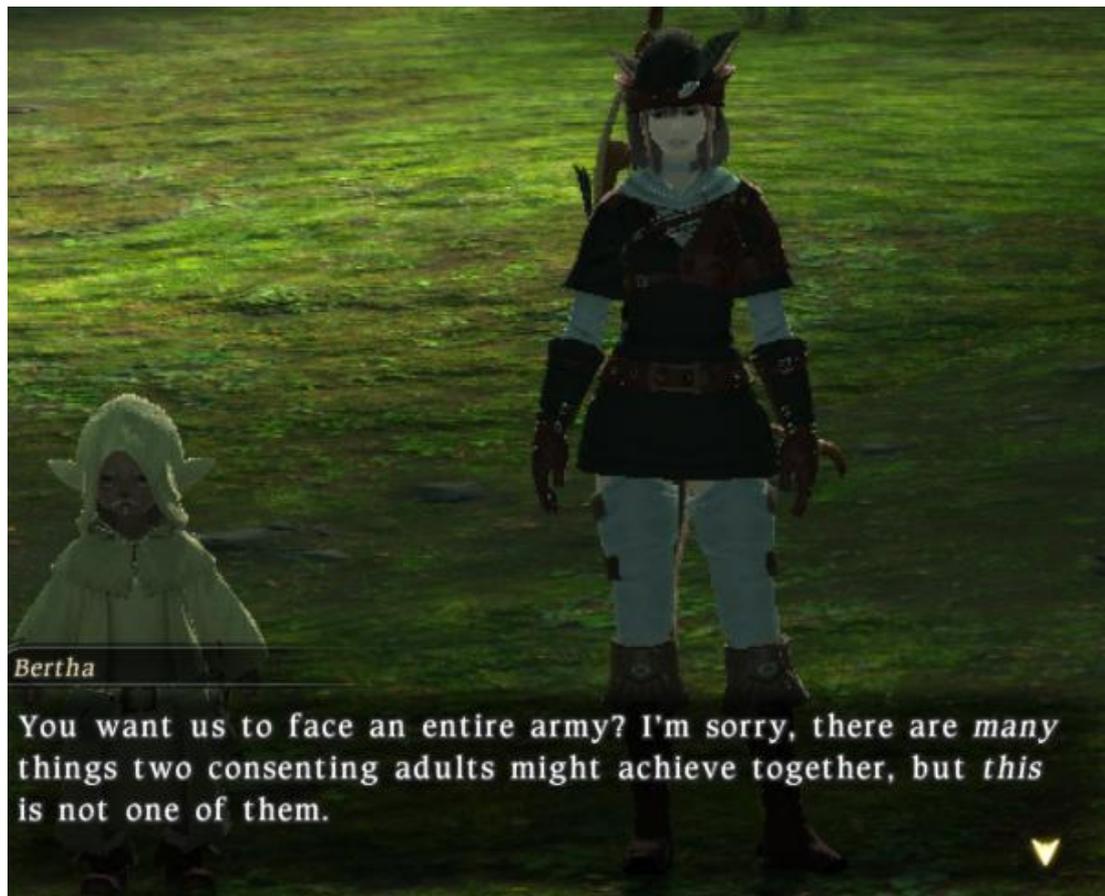
Figure 33 The Miqo'te on the right says this.

The player must select a companion for certain tasks around the middle of the game, and the Miqo'te companion in particular would continually make such remarks. Ferdy on the left, and his companion Bertha are being asked to defend the offspring of Sylphs in the Black Shroud Forest from the Imperial Army from the neighbouring state of Garlemald, which is poised to attack Eorzea. Consequently, the Miqo'te companion's comments are intended to be humorous, if a little unusual sounding. The fact remains however that Bertha would also joke about trying to seduce Ferdy, which she would say whether Ferdy were male or female.

However, the attitudes of players like C. in the forums encourage the reproduction of particular opinions about sexuality from offline life in relation to the game. In Sundén's part of the twin ethnography, she notes the confusion of other players

when told the guild was LGBT only (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012). Other players who had expressed an interest in joining could not see why LGBT players were trying to set themselves apart because of sexuality. Though Sundén felt the guild itself was constraining in some ways, such as how other players in the guild pressured her to define her sexuality away from being queer, she also noted that the guild enabled its LGBT players to interact in different ways, without so much heteronormative pressure. She suggests that such guilds can act as a safe haven for LGBT players in online games, in the face of the type of criticism outlined above, much like the women-only guilds Sveningsson studied (ibid.).

By looking at how views of sexuality are expressed in such spaces, the way in which heteronormativity can make itself felt online can be perceived even more clearly. In the following chapter on race in Final Fantasy XIV, the way in which players sought to exclude 'race' from debates of game races is examined, by stating that 'race' and race are irrelevant to gaming due to its escapist nature. The same idea underpins heteronormativity on the forum too. Where online games are framed as being separate to offline life, as a form of immersive escapism, such "real" life matters are excluded discursively by players. Healy (1997) posited that online communities were not necessarily so diverse because users could walk away from a group if they did not like the way the community was heading. However, Nardi (2010) stated that she was surprised at how many different occupations, ways of life and backgrounds were represented among World of Warcraft players – indeed she doubted that she would have met them in any other situation. I suggest that the difference with this type of community is that it is related to the game, which tends to keep players together through shared enjoyment of the game. Indeed, many of my respondents had played

Final Fantasy XI for up to ten years. Players may shift between different Linkshells and forums, but remain loyal to the game.

At times though, the Final Fantasy XIV players put forward the notion that fantasy and gaming should not feature "real" life considerations and debates. Grosz (2001) has noted a similar tension in discourses around virtual reality, which involves a user wearing a headset that projects a space directly into their field of vision, which was discussed in chapter three. Furthering her earlier work on the relationship between mind and body (Grosz, 1994), Grosz (2001) later developed an approach towards virtual reality, emphasising the masculine approach towards embodiment enshrined in such spaces. She notes the way in which a masculine, liberal discourse promotes the separation of the mind from the body, with virtual reality enabling an escape from the messy everyday and the body. In effect, virtual reality and online games enable a control fantasy for participants, which makes them believe these spaces can be more easily controlled in comparison to their everyday lives. The online gamers who sought to exclude discussion of homosexuality are pursuing a similar agenda. In promoting gaming as a way of escaping the everyday, these online gamers reify the game as a separate space that can be controlled. However, this study has shown how this gap does not actually exist beyond the discursive efforts made by players to prevent such discussions from taking place. This also affects the possibilities for performative identity, whether it be a more creative online identity, or how the player represents their offline life to online friends. These tensions can be seen further in the "missing genders" thread.

6.6 The "Missing Genders" Thread: Heteronormativity and the Embodied Avatar

Cloud participated in the first round of interviews in January 2011. At this point, he mentioned his campaign to persuade the development team to add the so-called "missing" genders prior to the game's release. He had also tried this in Final Fantasy XI, as well as other online games that had races with a single gender. In the interview, he mentioned having posted this request on as many fan forums as possible, so it was probably inevitable that he would do the same when the official, developer-run forum launched in March 2011. It was set up by the company to reach out to players and collect their suggestions to improve the game. The missing genders thread became popular very quickly. Many players were supportive, as they also wanted to play as these races, such as the following player.

> I, too, would love to see male miquotes and female roegadyns in game. I've never understood the mentality of providing only one gender, unless if the race itself only has one gender. However, as you state it's right there in the lore, that both genders exist. (Post Date: 8th March 2011)

Many posts mentioned the lore, which forms part of the game narrative and is written by authors in the development team, and alludes to the existence of female Roegadyn, male Miqo'te and female Highlander Hyur, but they never appear in the game. Cloud often referred to the lore argument suggesting it was odd that these races were mentioned, but seemingly invisible, or hidden elsewhere on the continent. In Final Fantasy XI, Cloud was thwarted since the Galka (the Roegadyn predecessor) were mono-gendered, and reincarnated instead of reproducing, according to the lore of that game. Similarly, the male Mithra (the Miqo'te equivalent) were said to be solitary and lived elsewhere. Yet, players who had spent a long time in Final Fantasy

XI often conflated the narrative of both games in voicing their objections, along the lines in the following post.

> If a male Miqote is written into lore as a very rare thing, then I am against the addition of a male Miqote as a playable race/gender. It would make the lore seem very silly indeed. If it doesn't mention this, then I don't mind either way. If it means less gender-swapping in the game then I'm all for that as it's annoying to talk to a Miqote and then discover they're a guy. First impressions and all that – you go by what you see!

> Same thing for female Roegadyn. If the lore allows for it, great, if it's a reincarnation lore that says there are only males, no thanks.

> I don't think the world suffers from the lack of these gender/race options if there is lore to explain it, basically. (Post Date: 19th March 2011)

Since the races look similar in both games, the players confuse the narratives, which is unsurprising as some of my respondents had played Final Fantasy XI for nearly ten years. This also suggests that at times the game's narrative can become a stronger reference point for players depending on the situation. In Pearce and Artemesia's (2009) study of players from the defunct Myst online game, the players became more attached to the narrative after the original game came to an end. Decisions related to the narrative, for example appearance, had to be screened by an individual who was considered an authority on the matter. The Myst group had also played the offline games in the series in the past, which left a significant cultural contribution for them to consider. The lore of the game and its series becomes internalised by the players who devote hours to it, over long periods of time. Consequently, the game's culture can have a similar effect to that of the culture the players have grown up in. The

players take these into account with their avatars, and the potential for change in the game itself is measured according to what the game permits according to its existing culture.

Interestingly, the above post also discusses gender switching. Other players also agreed that adding the missing genders could "discourage" gender switching, especially with the Miqo'te, which were associated with self-defined male players. Yet, judging by many self-defined female supporters, this seems unlikely.

> I'd love to play as a male miqo'te, even though it doesn't reflect my gender irl [in real life]. I just wouldn't be able to resist the cuteness. The idea of it just makes me smile, especially if they end up being more boyish that RRRRRGH GRUFF MANLY MAN type of models. It would be a hard decision between male miqo'te and female roe[gadyn], especially if both of them are done well. (Post Date: 16th March 2011)

Many self-defined female players in this thread were keen to play as male Miqo'te. Overall, the male Miqo'te is perceived as potentially more androgynous. If anything, the addition of male Miqo'te could increase gender switching. Moreover, the male Miqo'te was often framed in a similar way to the female, with an underlying theme of self-defined female players objectifying a male Miqo'te. This perpetuates the notion of the Miqo'te as more sexual than other races, and more attractive in some respects. In the thread, some self-defined female players posted along the following lines.

> I am gonna make a harem of catboys for myself! yay for female gamers who finally have their objects of desires! (Post Date: 14th April 2011)

Others countered this notion, rejecting the obvious sexual aspect in favour of a more restrained version concerning a cute male Miqo'te instead.

> It's not that I have a ~problem~ with yaoi or cat boys, it's the attitude. The reason most people stay away from the idea of manthra [male Mithra/Miqo'te] is because of the ~*LOLOL ANIME FANGURLZ*~ [fangirls] who pretty much just want to fetish...ize them/ make them make out with each other.

> The reason I want the missing genders is equality and to play something that suits my personality better, not so I can stare at my model for hours and write terrible slash fan fiction about him. (Post Date: 11th April 2011)

Yaoi is a particular form of hentai, which are erotic comics, and involve two young men either embarking on a romantic affair, or having a sexual encounter (McLelland, 2006). These comics tend to be produced for and by young heterosexual female consumers, but they are denigrated in Japan with the nickname Fujoshi ("rotten women") leading to the concealment of Fujoshi identity unless amongst others (Okabe and Ishida, 2012). McLelland (2006) however notes a link with so-called slash fiction, written by fans of shows about sexual relationships between male characters, such as Kirk and Spock in the original Star Trek series. He also points out that such comics have spread online into English-speaking cultures, much like other forms of anime and manga, through the internet. Final Fantasy players are often framed as fans of such cultures (Consalvo, 2012), which leads them to evoke such ideas. For some self-defined female heterosexual players, the male Miqo'te potentially represented as much of a sexualised avatar as the female Miqo'te for the self-defined male heterosexual players, yet the community framed such behaviour in

different ways. Given the relatively common occurrence of self-defined male players who use female avatars, their behaviour was more readily associated with secure heterosexuality, even if they were positioned as disrespectful, lonely, nerdy men, in the same fashion identified by Thornham (2011). In this particular game, the relationship with Japanese culture meant that these self-defined female players were associated with yaoi, and a comparatively worse position than the self-defined male players.

This point also suggests the importance of situating players within a socio-cultural context. With the players of this particular online game, their previous gaming experiences and subcultural involvements affect the community and the norms to which they refer. Other accounts of online gaming do not frame the players in any kind of offline cultural context, and tend to make gamers seem homogenous. Though Nardi (2010) states that she was surprised to discover a variety of players from different backgrounds in World of Warcraft, only their involvement in this particular game is noted for example. Moreover, unlike the homophobic discourse discussed in this chapter, these examples of self-defined female players suggest that excessive heterosexual desire is problematic. Relating to the avatar in a sexual manner is deemed strange, which was also suggested in Valkyrie's (2011) account of cybersex, who emphasises the need to establish the "facts" about the other player before engaging in any kind of cybersexual activity, though the act often involves a focus on the avatar, as discussed in chapter five concerning emotes. The controlling behaviour of certain gamers also means that homosexuality is excluded from discourse by some players, unlike heterosexuality.

Such assertions regarding the Miqo'te as a sexualised race also point to how gender, sexuality and game race cannot be viewed separately, thus researchers who suggest that sexuality should not be part of studies of online games are mistaken (e.g. Bainbridge, 2010). This point is further developed if the objections to the additions of the missing genders are included, which were homophobic in some instances due to the potential embodiment of these avatars.

Female Rogs [Roegadyn] no sorry against it

Male cats nope sorry not like the manthras [men who use Miqo'te avatars, or Mithra previously] that play will change to males anyways they play kitties for a reason ><

Femlale Highlanders say what???? so yall wanna see big giant muscle woman running around? Jhmmmm no thx [thanks] leave em the way they are (Post Date: 11th March 2011)

One of the main objections to the female versions of these races concerned size. Muscular female avatars were perceived as problematic and repellent. Other users went as far as stating they did not think such a "manly" female avatar would be very popular. In terms of embodiment, as it relates to a body project (Shilling, 2012), many players believe female avatars should correspond to particular embodied norms. Slender female avatars are normative, and larger, more muscular female avatars are framed as unintelligible within a heteronormative environment. This echoes the treatment of female bodybuilders, who are accused of being too masculine in seeking to build muscle, and unattractive to heterosexual men (Shilling and Bunsell, 2011). Similar judgements are applied to larger female avatars in games, though they are still used in other games, such as in World of Warcraft,

where Sundén (2009) noted that larger avatars can help self-defined female players hide from harassment.

Earlier in this chapter, the "sit" emote was examined in relation to how the process of gendering is enshrined in the game design and cannot be altered by the players. As a result, gender norms were deemed unavoidable in certain areas, especially with the avatar embodiment. These gender norms around embodiment can also be seen in the reaction to the potential design of the female Roegadyn. However, there are other notions at work here that still need to be unpacked.

> First off, having male mi'qote are a BAD IDEA. You'd be stealing the gay race from elezens. Not to mention, it would gay up the whole server something fierce. I'm talking pride parades, rainbow-colored trees etc., And no, I'm not against homosexuality, I just don't think it fits for this type of setting.
>
> And don't go telling me I'm wrong, because you know, deep down, that I'm right.
>
> The only reason anyone would play male cat person like the ones in this game is because they're a flaming homosexual who wants to look *CUTE* for all his friends. My post might get deleted because some sensitive person will contact the mods and claim it's discriminatory, but I just want a game without rainbow trees and bass-beat dance bars. Is that wrong of me to ask? Really? (Post Date: 15th March 2011)

This post is probably one of the more extreme objections and shows more blatant homophobia. The game is posited as a space where particular aspects of life ought to

be excluded, much like the wedding service thread discussed above. Muscular "masculine" female avatars and "feminine" male avatars remain subject to heteronormativity, even online. Though players to try to resist such norms, such as Tidus and Cloud discussed above, gender norms are constantly reinscribed. Gender still needs to be embodied along particular lines by the avatar itself, as noted above with the gendering of emotes, as well as performed in the right way, following Butler (1990). This thread illustrates how heteronormativity and homophobia operate in the game and its related spaces by being perpetuated through players and their prejudices. In this way, particular dialogues around gender are foreclosed as players emphasise normative ways of both performing and embodying gender in online games.

6.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has traced how heteronormativity can be studied in online games. Firstly, it is argued that authentic identity is unavoidably linked to heteronormativity, as players seek to police avatar gender to correspond with certain normative expectations. The avatar's gender needs to be congruent with the player's sex in the eyes of many players, which means that male avatars are expected to have male players using them. To do otherwise is deceptive, and the only way to justify using an alternately gendered avatar is to claim that one objectifies the avatar sexually. Heteronormative gender is also reinforced by the game design itself, which was identified in the discussion of the "sit" emote, and how this upholds particular embodied gender norms. This can also be perceived in attitudes towards the embodied avatar, where the design of avatar was framed by players and the game design as heteronormative, for example the opposition to the larger female Roegadyn. Avatar embodiment is inherent in the game design, but also supported by

the players in discourse. This also represents an important contribution to the study of gender in such spaces, by highlighting the role of heteronormativity in structuring gender online, which has been neglected elsewhere.

Secondly, the chapter addressed the stereotype of self-defined male players with female avatars using the accounts of gender switching players. A group of such players claimed that their decisions around the gender of the avatar were made on the basis of their offline gender, rather than sex, since they referred to themselves as feminine men. They also suggested that gender could be performed differently online, where they do not enact a hypersexual performance, and that they were more convincing as a result. Authentic identity and heteronormativity thus rely on gender more than sex, where avatar gender performance is scrutinised. Respondents such as Cloud and Squall point to how offline gender can be more important to performative identity. Moreover, the example of Cait Sith points to how an alternate gender can be maintained online, but only through a lack of openness with others. His success additionally relies upon the lower bandwidth nature of the interaction offered by the game, and the prevalence of stereotypes concerning how gender affects speech and emotional communication. These are all important points that the previous research in this area has failed to unpack sufficiently, while perpetuating the stereotype.

Thirdly, the chapter argued for an examination of the sexual norms that continue to pervade online spaces, which has been neglected in much of the research in this area. This is also important in regard to heteronormativity, which is partly based on heterosexuality as a norm and how this affects gender. Gender is policed partly to avoid an accidental homosexual encounter through cybersex, but there is also vilification and shaming for those who fall for players who have not been transparent. Homophobia remains a problem within this community, like many other

online games, and becomes a way for players to try to exert control in the mistaken belief that such spaces are separate from the rest of social life. Moreover, self-defined female players are perceived as excessively sexual if they claim to objectify the avatar at all, in contrast to the self-defined male players. Sexual norms remain intact online and show how gaming research needs to consider other aspects of sexuality beyond sexual behaviour to challenge homophobia within gaming cultures.

The next chapter is concerned with the role of race in games. Race is discussed as a way of examining the tension between meta-roleplay and authenticity further, by exploring the norms that the players refer to regarding the race of avatars. While these norms constrain performative identity, authenticity is reshaped so that players must behave in keeping with the norms of the race. In the same way that homophobia was examined in this chapter as part of heteronormativity, the exclusion of 'race' from discussion about the game is examined in the same vein.

Chapter 7 Race/'Race': Racial Signifiers, Embodiment and the Performance of Identity

This chapter turns to the relationship between game race and the social category of 'race', and their respective roles in performative identity in online spaces, by continuing to examine the second and third questions. The second question relates to the notion of authentic identity, and the ramifications for online identity, which in this chapter is considered in relation to game race. Then, the third question examines the role of social norms in shaping the possibilities for performative identity, hence this chapter concerns the norms around game race and the social category 'race'.

The previous chapter concerned gender and sexuality in Final Fantasy XIV, specifically how heteronormativity continues to structure social interaction online, and limits the possibilities for performative identity and embodiment. Heteronormativity also contributes to the notion of authentic identity outlined by van Zoonen (2013). Where heteronormativity assumes the congruence of biological sex and gender, in online games it becomes a way of ensuring authentic identity, which denotes the presence of a single identity in a single body. Players who switch gender with their avatar are often seen as suspicious by others, for example, because they are seen as inauthentic where their biological sex does not match the gender of their avatar. In contrast, this chapter demonstrates that players are permitted a degree of experimentation with race. In online games, players believe race reveals an "inner" self, according to particular norms attached to each race, like 'race' in the sociological sense. Chapter two considered research that examined how 'race' and game race are inter-related, but on the whole the relationship remains neglected. The reproduction of racism in particular types of games has been cited as problematic (Leonard, 2006; Higgin, 2009; Galloway, 2012), with less focus on how players

perform race (or 'race') in a game. This chapter therefore examines how races in the game are framed normatively, in regard to the game's culture (or lore), and how players perform the races, referring to Butler's (1990) work. It is also important to examine the continuation of racism in this game through exclusions of 'race' from discussions.

Given the emphasis in this thesis on the socio-cultural context of gaming, the first section considers how players select the race of their avatar, a topic that remains under-researched. Unlike the selection of gender, which is constrained by notions of authenticity and heteronormativity, players offer a much broader range of explanations about race selection. In terms of historical reasons, it has been noted that many of the respondents have played Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games (MMORPGs) for a number of years. The context of selecting race for these players is thus often imbued with a sense of history and prolonged attachment to a particular type of race. Butler (1990) also emphasises how gender is in part a process of becoming over time, and race in online games can be part of the same process, with players becoming more attached over time to a race, and more comfortable in performing it. Thus their online history remains an important factor, but so is their offline history and life. With regard to their offline embodiment, race was also partly selected on the basis of their appearance and build. The avatar as a body project (Shilling, 2003) thus becomes a key link between the avatar and the player, as it is designed to reflect the players' appearances directly. Having an avatar that resembled the player in some way provided a closer relationship between themselves and the game. A screenshot is included in this section for illustration.

The next section concerns how race is performed in Final Fantasy XIV. In the previous chapter, the performance of gender was deemed important in how players

perceive others in a space where the offline body is less visible. It is argued that the performance of the avatar's race offers the clearest example of meta-roleplay. Players use a varied performance, involving signifiers including how the avatar "talks", dresses, and so on. This continues to use the work of Butler (1990), in terms of performativity and identity. Chapter five argued that players' interaction with others becomes part of performative identity. This argument is continued here, since avatars of particular races are expected to talk and act in particular ways. The identity performed is thus shaped by the avatar's embodiment. Players' accounts of their interactions with others demonstrate how this can be accomplished, as well as forum discussions that highlight how players enact identity in the game and related spaces. It is also important to consider how players judge the races to examine players' interpretations of the values enshrined in the software (Pearce and Artemesia, 2009). In both interviews and forum threads, particular ideas were put forward about the races in Final Fantasy XIV, which shape how players perform this particular identity. Consequently, it is important to tease out some of these ideas and how players are effectively interpellated into particular positions through these norms. This section involves a comparison of the Elezen and the Hyur races to examine how this occurs. Screenshots are included here for illustrative purposes.

The final section focuses on how the players continue to reify a separation of online and offline life through discussions of 'race' and race. In the missing genders thread, which was discussed in the previous chapter, a handful of players also noted how a non-white appearance was difficult to achieve in Final Fantasy XIV. Others rejected the idea that 'race' should play a part in a fantasy game, which is examined closely. Screenshots are used in this section for analytical purposes. Moreover, the attitude of Euro-American players towards the Japanese players warrants attention, since this

illustrates how implicit racism is perpetuated in discussions, but reframed as xenophobia based on nationality. This further contributes to how 'race' is excluded from consideration in these spaces, and implicit racism further undermines claims about the possibility of escapism in games.

7.1 Selecting Race: Player History, Relationships, and Embodiment

In the interviews, players offered a range of reasons regarding the race of their avatar. These cover different areas, depending on the player's background, but the most common can be divided in the following ways. Chapter five partly examined how players had often spent a long time playing various online games, gaining experience and building up relationships with others. In the interviews, it also became apparent that players often became attached to particular races over time to maintain an appearance across online games. This enabled continuity for the player in online gaming, superseding the games they had played. Yet, some of the players who played the game with a partner chose to represent their relationship visibly in online games by having avatars of the same race as their partner. The other main reason put forward in interviews was the embodiment offered by the avatar and how it matched their own in some way. These players suggested that their offline embodiment encouraged them to think in certain ways, and they could not imagine themselves any other way, even online, which points to an interesting mind and body dynamic. This resulted in perpetuating an avatar of a similar size online to continue a particular performative identity that was more closely related to their offline life.

All of these have the embodiment of the avatar in common, especially in regard to the body project (Shilling, 2012). The race of the avatar has a significant effect on its appearance, which can be used to signify different aspects of offline identity online.

Previous chapters have noted the assumption that the internet user can render herself invisible in online, which became the cornerstone of Turkle's (1995) work. It could be argued that race affords varying degrees of visibility, starting with players who use race to signify parts of their lives in relatively small ways, and later moving on to players who project themselves more directly into the game. Visibility also becomes a way of signifying authentic identity, by marking the existence of the offline body and identity of the player.

7.1.1 Player History and Continuity of Race

Over time, players become attached to a race. In most online games, particular types of race are perpetuated from the fantasy genre, such as Elves, Dwarves, and Humans (Higgin, 2009). Though their appearance differs between games, certain features persist, such as the height of Elves. This enabled players to maintain a particular race across different online games if they wished. Rinoa explained her decision around race as follows.

> I tend to always pick female characters, and I will never choose human, I find them to be boring. I like to choose races like elves or anamorphic creatures if available. I suppose it adds to the fantasy of becoming something incredible… In FFXIV [Final Fantasy XIV] in particular I definitely wanted to stay in the same type of race I used in ffxi [Final Fantasy XI], I felt that since I quit FFXI, I would create a character in FFXIV that was a nod to my past MMO[RPG] life and still a sort of evolution into a new mmo experience. LI [her avatar's name] looks like she could have descended from my FFXI L[avatar name] hah. [27, Female, California]

Her Final Fantasy XI avatar was a Mithra, the predecessors to the Miqo'te in Final Fantasy XIV. Despite the graphical improvements in the latter, she tried to make them look alike facially too. Like many of my respondents, she had played Final Fantasy XI for a number of years, before transferring to Final Fantasy XIV. As a result, she felt her performative identity was more persistent because of this continuity, extending far back beyond the five months that had passed between the start of Final Fantasy XIV and the date of the interview. This attachment was important for her and other players, providing a sense of history to their play.

Her performance could be part of the type of becoming suggested by Butler (1990) with regard to gender, which was also discussed in the last chapter. One of Butler's (1990) main points is how the process of gendering takes place over long periods of time. This involves being interpellated into a gender, which becomes part of the performative identity. Chapter three also examined how 'race' could be viewed as performative like gender, and how this could be used in relation to games. 'Race' can be performative, in terms of how particular statements can enact a racialised identity, such as Mercer's (1994) work on hair for example. In this interpretation, black hair becomes the subject of political and performative statements depending on its style, including the afro in comparison to braiding. This chapter argues that game race can also be considered performative, with players becoming accustomed to particular races over time. The persistent performance does often need modification to fit the new game, such as the facial appearance options. It was discussed in the previous chapter that self-defined female players may use particular races to hide for example, thus selecting "uglier" races such as Trolls more persistently (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012). This also points to the relationship between different online spaces. In chapter five, it was pointed out how whole groups of players transfer

between games (Taylor, 2006), when new games are released. By keeping their race the same where possible, these players are also creating the same kind of continuity. This also points to the importance of the gamer's history, which leads to persistent preferences. Though race can be chosen by the player at the start of a game, it can be more persistent like 'race' where players opt to maintain their game race in this fashion.

7.1.2 Players and Their Partners: Visibility and Race

Continuity was also maintained between online and offline, where four respondents and their partners both selected the same races. Six respondents mentioned playing Final Fantasy XIV with their partners, or even in one case, meeting their current partner in Final Fantasy XI. The previous chapter largely discussed sexuality from a heteronormativity perspective, with less emphasis placed on sexual behaviour or relationships. Here, I wish to discuss the selection of race as a way of representing a relationship online. A few also selected the same surname for their avatars to maintain this link in another fashion. Playing an online game together was a way of socialising, much like Thornham's (2011) adult housemates playing games together after work. Chapter three also explored how much of the online research relates to the issue of visibility. Identity was believed to be more multiple online because the user's body was less visible (Turkle, 1995), and that difference could be transcended (Rheingold, 1994). Though chapter three argued against this perspective, these players make their relationship visible deliberately through the appearance of the avatar. Zack explained how he and his partner created their avatars jointly.

It was very important as far as planning what race to be to match everything we wanted together as a team. We discussed it for about a week on races and

lore and classes. I use to roleplay in Ultima Online, Dark Ages of Camelot and WoW [other online games], so a race was very important to me and the lore that fit around it…Even our names had to fit our type. We just went to a basic elven language site. Picked forest watcher for her. [..] and for me it was harder but chose little flame cloak […] which to me represented a hidden dragon. [22, Male, Huntsville, Alabama]

Zack and his partner thus selected an Elezen avatar, specifically the Wildwood clan from the forest city of Gridania. Furthermore, when I asked Zack if he had any screenshots of his avatar for the image elicitation interview, he spent around a week composing screenshots with his partner, and sent only pictures of them posing as a pair – none on his own. Selphie also had a secondary avatar that she had designed to complement her partner's, with the same race and surname, though she tended to use another more frequently. Other players also played the game with their partners, without using race as a visible marker. Lulu only played the game with her partner as a duo, yet their avatars did not have the same race. When asked about their joint play, most of these players stated that they both enjoyed playing videogames, and it was a way of spending time together, much like the gamers in Thornham's (2011) study. Race thus became a visible marker of their offline relationships for these players. Chapter three examined the stereotype of the lone male gamer, which dominated much of the discourse around games. Later, in chapter five, the sociable nature of Final Fantasy XIV players was put forward to counter this idea. For these players, the sociality of playing the game with their partner could be signified through the avatar. Moreover, the time players spend with partners and family in online games is neglected in much research. Nardi (2010) notes that families separated by distance may use online games as an alternative to Skype for example.

Yet partners who play online games together remain under-researched. In this way, these players use race to enact a shared identity from their offline lives.

7.1.3 Offline Embodiment and Race

For a handful of players, it was important to project themselves into the game in some way. In particular, certain players also claimed that their physical size affected how they saw themselves, so they had to find avatars that corresponded to their own size. Montblanc explained how he played Final Fantasy XIV with his partner, who partly influenced his decision-making, but he also felt the need to take his height into account too.

> If you take a look at my above answer, I stated that my Avatar is a personification of how I feel I would look like just based off my personality. Though to be honest I probably would not have picked Lalafell if my first choice were available. I cannot and do not see myself as particularly strong so a bulky character isn't right. Nor do I see myself as very cartoony or serious. I see myself as an inbetween. The hair has to be just right (to actually match my own hair to an extent). I'm also not very tall, so a tall character would not do. Race is something that I sometimes think about when I'm bored. Imagining how my life would go if I lived in this world and how it would be if I were the race I chose. Having a tail would be one interesting experience if I were a male Miqo'te, though the aspect of not looking like I wasn't a threat and then being a very skilled one is entertaining to say the least about Lalafells. [20, Male, Massachusetts, Disabled]

His partner had originally stated that he wished to play as a Lalafell as he thought they were cute, but Montblanc also felt as if a Lalafell would fit his own parameters

for choosing a race. The relationship between his offline and online embodiment can be seen here, where he emphasises preferring a short avatar. Part of the avatar's role is to represent the player to others within the game (Taylor, 2003), thus proving presence to a certain extent. If we return to the idea of the avatar as a body project (Shilling, 2012), this also points to the function of the avatar signifying identity. In this case, the avatar is being used to represent the player's physical size, and to make the offline player more visible. Shapiro (2010) examined residents in Second Life who reproduced themselves online but in an idealised form, such as the avatar being thinner than the resident. Final Fantasy XIV does not offer such detailed means of adjusting the avatar's appearance as Second Life, yet Montblanc is evoking a meta-roleplay approach here. In the following screenshot, my Lalafell avatar Ferdy looks tiny compared to many of the avatars around him.

Figure 34 My avatar Ferdy at an Aetheryte Camp in the desert.

Lalafells are not much taller than knee height compared to the other avatars here, which are mostly Elezen and Hyur. It is easy to see how their height leads to the association with children, and child-like behaviour. Returning briefly to Montblanc, it is not just that the avatar's height is important, but he has thought through how the Lalafell would be perceived by others for meta-roleplay purposes, and the potential for taking players by surprise. In the previous chapter, Cait Sith similarly put forward the idea that his Lalafell avatar made him feel younger in how he acted.

The other noticeable point in Montblanc's account relates to fantasy, where he talks about imagining how he would be if he were the avatar. Rinoa also mentioned wanting to create an avatar that was capable of "incredible" things. The notion of fantasy and race was a recurring theme in interviews, often in regard to escapism in online games. However, when the norms attached to a race were discussed on the forum, it becomes apparent that there are limits to how "fantastical" an avatar can become. A thread on the forum entitled "what race are you? And why?" alluded to the norms attached to the Lalafell. This post outlines why one player chose a Lalafell avatar.

Lalafell, because:

A. It's frikkin adorable

B. My character doesn't get in the way of stuff as much [A reference to their small stature meaning they take up less space]

C. I fit in people's laps

D. They make the best jesters

E. They have some of the best exploitable positions [This relates to their emotes]

F. Upskirts [being small enough to look up the skirts of female avatars] (Post Date: 30ᵗʰ June 2011)

The race thus acts as a catalyst for meta-roleplay for this player - in this instance, the Lalafell as a child-like avatar. Players who like the Lalafell emphasise cuteness as a good quality, and that appearing inoffensive means that they can "get away" with behaviour that could cause upset if using a different race. This forum user links being able to sit in other avatar's laps, like a child, with other more mischievous behaviour such as appearing to look up another avatar's skirt. Other players, such as Cait Sith, claim to enjoy readily using emotes to be more expressive, which is also implied in this post. These notions run counter to the narrative created by the game designers about the Lalafell, who are characterised as wise and industrious, with many either famed alchemists or traders. The norms mainly characterised by the players relate entirely to the stature of the avatar. This suggests that the embodiment of the avatar's race encourages a particular type of performance, where the narrative is not necessarily deemed so important. With the Elezen, the game's narrative is closer to the fantasy canon's depiction of Elves (Higgin, 2009), so the performance expected of this race is more aligned to the narrative, which is discussed in more depth later. The players are happier to maintain the narrative if it corresponds to their pre-existing ideas of a particular race. Taylor (2006) points to how the shortest race in EverQuest is the Dwarf or Gnome, which are embedded in Jewish stereotypes (Higgin, 2009), yet do not resemble children, or could even be claimed to be cute. Instead, the embodiment of the Lalafell becomes the main substance for the norms attributed to the race. Players referred to the Tarutaru in Final Fantasy XI in similar

ways, and conflated the two in interviews and on the forum. The socio-cultural context of these gamers and their gaming history thus bleeds through into the newer game, leading to a conflation of norms in the minds of players. However, the process of interpellation can also be seen in the expectation that the Lalafell avatars *will* be child-like in their performance.

In contrast, the larger size of the Roegadyn signified something else. Barret expressed himself in a similar way to Montblanc concerning how he perceived the Roegadyn in relation to his own embodiment.

> When character creation is an option i spend a bit of time creating something that i think looks good. when there are various races to choose from i normaly pick the big brutish type. going back to my lite rp [lite roleplay] i am a big guy in real life. Its easier for me to think through a big guys decisions. [30, Male, USA]

Barret was one of the respondents who particularly emphasised the importance of either meta-roleplay or "lite" roleplay in the first wave of interviews. Here he refers to a "big brutish type", which is one of the stereotypical race options in most fantasy games. In World of Warcraft, the Tauren, discussed in chapter two, are another example of a larger, more bestial avatar (Bainbridge, 2010). To perform as his avatar, Barret also felt the need for his offline and online embodiments to match so that he could place himself in his avatar's shoes. Moreover, the relationship between mind and body is visible here, where he and Montblanc imply that the avatar's body affects how they think or act in the game, based on their offline embodiment. Such accounts also demonstrate one of the many ways in which internet use is experienced as embodied. Barret's explanation also suggests a historical aspect like Rinoa, as he

had previously played as a Galka in Final Fantasy XI, the Roegadyn's predecessor. Players' performative identities become stable over time, and coalesce around a particular appearance and embodiment. Yet a thread concerning the lack of Roegadyn avatars in the game claimed that the Roegadyn were too big and stupid to be appealing, and the following post is representative of these arguments.

> Usually the dumb ones [players] playing them or people who just act dumb that play em whether through rp [roleplay] or not >.< I'll admit that I'm a bit prejudice of them myself, but I do relize hat there are tons who don't fit this profile. It's just funny when they do act like this and the fact that at least 60% of em I've seen in 11 and 14 act this way o.O…

> Also I don't [know] how they are considered 'cute' by some people xD Just my opinion but they're big green giants who are overweight (I know its mostly muscle but too much muscle so disgusting and roe's [Roegadyn] + galka's are too damn bulky bleh) and no longer carry a tail like [Final Fantasy] 11, so to me… ugly ^^ (Post Date: 7th May 2011)

This user cites ideas relating to the size of the Roegadyn body and offline associations with the body and intelligence. The post also refers to the Galka in Final Fantasy XI, the Roegadyn equivalent, but had a long tail like a dinosaur. Nonetheless, the conflation of the races from both games was prevalent, especially given the continuity in physical size, as discussed in regard to the Lalafell above. Thus the ideas and assumptions that players had formed over time, while playing both Final Fantasy XI and XIV, became entrenched in their minds. Again, this is unrelated to the narrative, since the Roegadyn are depicted as either swash-buckling pirates and sailors in the Sea Wolf clan, or monastic folk or martial artists in the

Hellsguard clan. Earlier chapters have pointed to the importance of the game design in relation to avatar appearance (Taylor, 2006). This example suggests that players may ignore part of the game's culture, when convenient, which contradicts how some of them reacted in discussions of lore, such as the missing genders thread examined in the last chapter. The appearance of avatars is harder to ignore because the player sees them constantly, but parts of the game's culture may be less visible and less internalised by players in comparison to the assumptions drawn from offline life and previous gaming experiences.

Roegadyn players contested the view expressed in this post by comparing them to "friendly giants". Nevertheless, other players added to the thread suggesting they were not always the smartest players. In interaction with others, players of a certain race are expected to behave in particular ways, which interpellates the player. Once again, another stereotype can be seen around larger people and lower intelligence (Monaghan, 2005). Players maintain these online due to the nature of communication in such a space (O'Brien, 2001). Consequently, the norms relating to the race shift towards its embodied aspect – namely the size of avatars – instead of cultural norms from the game's narrative, especially with the Roegadyn and Lalafell.

The above examples suggest that authenticity is situated differently in relation to race in games. Authentic avatar gender has to match the player's sex, thus emphasising a link between offline and online. Authentic avatar race is linked to the performance undertaken by the player. It is becoming apparent that players expect each race to enact performative identity in particular ways, whether "immature" Lalafell or "stupid" Roegadyn. Players' accounts suggest that meta-roleplay is possible in online games because the player can choose race more easily since there is less pressure, in comparison to heteronormativity and gender. Authenticity with

race relates to the performative identity matching the embodied identity and avatar through interpellation, whereby other players "hail" the player to perform identity according to their expectations. In effect, to return to van Zoonen's (2013) notion of authentic identity, only one identity is possible in a single body, but when that body is easily replicated across avatars that can only be one of five races, the single "identity" coalesces through repetition by players performing as them, and interpellation by other players. Additionally, players' claims about escapism and fantasy are constrained by authentic identity and interpellation. The traits associated with each of the races are also believed to make particular aspects of the players' identities visible online.

For some players, the debates around visibility and authenticity resulted in attempts to project themselves directly into the game, like Laguna, who exemplifies how claims to escapism can be severely hindered by others. Originally, his avatars were more fantastical, yet an incident with members of his Linkshell made him rethink his avatar and now he deliberately reproduces his embodiment in avatar form more closely.

> Creating a character that shares my likeness keeps me grounded in reality and allows me to make an honest representation of myself, i.e. "What you see is what you get". I developed this outlook back when I was playing FFXI years ago. My character was an Elvaan [the Elezen's predecessor] Paladin[37], I was the owner of a large linkshell at the time, and people looked up to me for guidance and leadership. I also made efforts to become an expert in the game and received a great deal of respect; something I never really had in life being a man of smaller stature at 5'5". I took it all in, chalking it up to the fact that I

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[37] Paladin was one of the classes in Final Fantasy XI, who were knights with swords.

was a reliable, adept player. Later on, I met with a few linkshell members at a get-together with my friends, and I got remarks along the lines of "wow, I really expected you to be taller" or "who is this little guy, and where is the badass?" I treated it as friendly taunts, but as time passed, they would ignore me more often than not while we played and began to look down on me. It was a wake-up call to realize appearance was a major factor in getting all that respect I thought I had earned. Since then, I've always felt the need to show myself accurately and receive approval despite my shortcomings much as I do in life. [25, Male, US]

In both Final Fantasy XI and XIV, the Elvaan and the Elezen are the tallest races in the games. Following these comments relating to his stature, Laguna only uses the Hyur race, who are basically human in appearance, in order to project a closer approximation of his appearance into the game. His performance as a skilled player would thus be judged partly due to his embodiment. Laguna's account also suggests how players use the performative identity and the embodied avatar to imagine what the offline player looks like, which was discussed in relation to gender in the previous chapter. Much of the premise of online gaming involves escapism and fantasy. Unlike Thornham's (2011) gamers, who framed escapism as perverse, many of my respondents valued escaping from the everyday. In the previous chapter, Tidus suggested his online gaming was valuable at a time of personal upset, for example. Laguna and others also discussed the sense of achievement gained from advancing in online games, which has been discussed in other research (Taylor, 2006). Above, players like Montblanc and Rinoa discussed how such games could enable them to to become someone greater than themselves. Nevertheless, contrary to the name of the game, fantasy is limited by the values of other players. The level of escapism

afforded is regulated by the others' opinions, who shape what the player can realistically achieve.

In chapter five, the association between lack of knowledge and youth was noted in the forum, and Laguna's narrative is underpinned by a similar idea. Authoritative figures are often associated with height, both in online games and offline, especially with men, which led players to express surprise when meeting Laguna in person for the first time. Once again, the player's history is referenced in relation to race. The incident in question affects how he creates the avatar body project because of the way other players perceive him, and his enactment of skilful identity. Throughout the interview, Laguna seemed proud of his skilful approach to the game, and could be considered a "hardcore", or "power" gamer in the way played. Laguna also alludes to how the performance of race is also important, with a Hyur avatar (which are the most human looking) enabling him to project himself directly into the game, and "be" himself. He felt that by projecting an avatar that bore a closer resemblance to him, it would create a different impression on others, evoking an authentic identity coupled with an authentic embodiment.

This point is also related to van Zoonen's (2013) perspective on authentic identity. If an authentic identity is one that resides in a single body, this study has argued that avatars problematise this perspective. With these narratives of continuity of different aspects of identity and embodiment online, an authentic embodied identity can take different forms. Chapter six posited that gender becomes a test for authentic identity by ensuring heteronormative ideals are maintained in regard to the player's sex and the avatar's gender. With race, authentic identity translates quite literally for some, like Laguna, Montblanc and Barret, who reference their physical bodies to fashion the avatar according to how they enact a particular identity. In their eyes, the fidelity

of height and appearance between their offline bodies and the avatar enhanced the authenticity of the identity they sought to enact. It becomes difficult for them to imagine taking on a different embodiment in an online game. Moreover, this also includes making the offline self visible deliberately through the race of the avatar, which questions the notion that the user is less visible in online spaces, since they go to such efforts to make themselves visible in various ways. Nevertheless, respondents claimed that race also provides opportunities for meta-roleplay, which is also tempered by the normative framework around a race, and the process of interpellation.

7.2 The Performance of Race: Meta-Roleplay and the Relationship Between Norms and Interpellation

This chapter has suggested that the performance of race in online games offers one of the clearest examples of meta-roleplay as set out by players like Auron and Barret. Virtually all video games, whether online or not, offer a narrative, either minimal or expansive (Juul, 2005). Efforts have been made in academic research to critically examine the narratives of video games in relation to 'race', such as Daniels and LaLone's (2012) work on implicit and explicit racism in video games. In online gaming, the work of Higgin (2009), Galloway (2012), and Ritsema and Thakore (2012) have built a case for examining the way in which developers incorporate signifiers of 'race' into online race. In chapter two, I emphasised the need to understand how players approach performative identity with regard to game race, which can reveal other ways of considering race, such as Sundén's (2009) and Sundén and Sveningsson's (2012) work concerning how races become a way of enacting a queer identity. Taylor (2006) also noted that self-defined female players in EverQuest would use shorter races as they were less curvaceous, attracting less

sexual harassment. Higgin (2009) criticises the Dwarf and Gnome related races for echoing a Jewish stereotype, with long noses, short stature and a greedy nature. Researchers thus emphasise either the performative aspect of race or the signifiers of 'race' and narrative descriptions of 'race'/race imbued by the game designers. This section holds that both of these are important, with the game designers' narrative, and the norms attributed by players shaping how race can be performed, to the point where players are interpellated into a particular position.

Butler (1993) holds that interpellation is an important aspect of gendering, borrowing from the work of Althusser (1971). Interpellation functions by drawing a person into a particular position socially. Institutions thus shape the individual's identity through social forces, which lead the individual to take up a particular subject position. Butler (1993) puts forward that heteronormativity is one of these forces, which affects gender in particular. With regard to gender in online games, the previous chapter noted how this translated into players being pushed towards an authentic identity performance where gender and sex match between the player and the avatar. The performance of race is somewhat different. Race forms part of meta-roleplay, with players enjoying the process of performing as their avatar's race in a theatrical fashion. This remains in tension with authenticity, relating to the body of the avatar. The above section noted how authenticity can be a force that shapes the selection of race, such as always choosing the same type of race, such as Elves, and Dwarves. Each race is associated with a series of norms, which designers embed in the game, and those attributed by players. These create an impression around how certain races are viewed by others, and interpellate the players who use such avatars into a particular performance. Avatars of certain races are thus expected to behave in specific ways. Much like the authentic identity that encourages the notion of a single

body and a single identity (van Zoonen, 2013), with race, the avatar's raced body is the focus of attention, rather than the body of the player. Based on the stereotypes around the races, players are expected to enact an identity within particular parameters, though they can still choose race more readily. This gives the impression that players can opt for meta-roleplay, within a limited range.

To illustrate how roleplay can be achieved, Zell discussed how he would undertake roleplay if he had the time.

> I don't roleplay, but if I had the time to dedicate to it I would. […] I do think I would play slightly different depending on my avatar. For instance if I was a Roegedyn I would be more inclined to play a heavy fighter or tank role. However being a human of average stature in game allows me to be whatever I want. If I could be a male Mi'qote it would depend on the style they went... if it were more lion than panter I would play a more arms and armor type role and something more swashbuckler like (rapier, dagger) if it were a more streamlined cat. [32, Male, Cambridgeshire]

I include this to explain how roleplay can be interpreted by the players of Final Fantasy XIV and how it relates to race in particular. Sometimes roleplay is related to the size or appearance of the avatar, which inspire the creation of a narrative. Race becomes a fertile area for the player to imagine how they could be if they were to project themselves into the game. However, this does not need to result in full roleplay, as suggested by Vivi in an interview.

> That's one of those things that I seem to change unconsciously, each avatar I create will have a different voice coming from it, despite the fact that it's the same person behind each. When the original L. [a Tarutaru, the

Lalafell precursors] was in FFXI, he was in a linkshell with another of my avatars, a Galka [the Roegadyn predecessor]. Unbeknownst to me at first, anyone in that linkshell who didn't know for a fact that I was both avatars thought they were separate people because of how each acted. [25, Male, Cincinnati]

Vivi thus exemplified how meta-roleplay works in comparison. It can relate to how the avatar "speaks" to others, as suggested by Cait Sith with his two avatars in the previous chapter. Vivi also points to how avatars are viewed as individual players by other members of the Linkshell. In chapter four, I explained how Final Fantasy XIV players were more attached to single avatars because of the structure of the game. Consequently, the avatar was perceived as a single person's identity performance, which places greater emphasis on authentic identity (van Zoonen, 2013). Vivi suggests that with multiple avatars, the player needs to offer a distinct identity performance for each in a meta-roleplay fashion, which can, in turn, convince other players that individual avatars have a separate player behind them. This is in the same vein as the belief in a single identity in a single body (ibid.), just with an avatar.

Where race allows for a broader range of possibilities in terms of performance, many players take up the possibility willingly. Gender remains proof of authenticity through heteronormativity (Valkyrie, 2012), yet the way in which race can potentially be performed casts another light on the situation. Hence, it is important to look at race alongside gender and sexuality, otherwise performative identity can seem limited. Race demonstrates how meta-roleplay can be part of the performance of identity, though it remains in tension with authenticity. I argued in the beginning of this section that players can be interpellated into particular positions through the

norms associated with particular races. The following examines two different races in turn to explore the tensions between performance and the norms surrounding the race. This is intended to give further insight into the possibilities of identity performance, and the interplay between identity, embodiment and the normative frameworks that persist in Final Fantasy XIV. Moreover, this also contributes to how race can be analysed, which has been neglected in the literature. A consideration of the Elezen, the Elven race in Final Fantasy XIV, and the Hyur, who are the most human looking, follows to examine how stereotypes around a race can prevail in the minds of players.

Figure 35 An Elezen Non-Player Character (NPC)

The Elezen are an Elven race, and are associated with narratives relating to Elves. Higgin (2009) emphasises the importance of European mythology and fantasy in the framing of this race with particular signifiers. A particular cultural imagination is thus brought to bear in these online games. Bainbridge (2010) notes how the various Elves in World of Warcraft are always dismissive of other races, perceiving themselves to be superior. Monson (2012) also pointed to how Blood Elves in World of Warcraft were interpreted as Aryan by neo-Nazi players, who particularly preferred them. The narrative of Final Fantasy XIV also frames the Elezen as superior and bigoted, positing them as the original inhabitants of the game's continent, but they were pushed aside as the Hyur took over. Balthier explained their appeal thus.

> In the beta[38] version I chose the Duskwight Elezen for both their prowess in hand to hand combat and their hatred of the humes [Hyur]. For the main game I chose the Wildwood Elezen because they looked better…I'm not oblivious to the immediate conclusion that can be drawn from this but I can assure you I am not racist in real life and this is not a connection to my values. I was very involved in FFXI and it was one of the few things that stayed the same from both games. The Elvaan, the proud and mighty race, fallen from power and forced to live in caves. This was a story I was interested to play out, though there is a serious lack of race-related content in FFXIV. [28, Male, New Jersey]

In the discussion earlier regarding avatar creation, the player's gaming history was deemed important in this process, and Balthier also evokes this. The Elvaan of Final

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[38] This relates to the testing phase of the game, where a select number of players were invited to test the game for bugs.

Fantasy XI and the Elezen of Final Fantasy XIV had similar origin stories, which seem to have a post-colonial feel, such as the Native Americans being pushed away when European settlers arrived. This is blended with the typical Elven disdain for other races to give the Elezen a snooty veneer. Balthier refers to race-related content, where many online games create conflict between races that can be acted out by players. In World of Warcraft, different Elves from different sides of the war enshrined in the narrative are sworn enemies (Bainbridge, 2010). Often these enmities can be recreated in the game, but Final Fantasy XIV does not permit such behaviour.

It is noticeable how Balthier is anxious to distance himself from the possible accusation of racism. This idea is discussed later in greater detail, but players actively strive to separate 'race' from race. It could be argued that Balthier is undertaking a performative act by expressing sympathy with the narrative behind the race, yet I should not draw any inferences as to his values. Other players suggested Elezen avatars show arrogance, and by extension, the players behind them. Kain put it thus in an interview.

> I think the elf thing is due to some kind of ingrained idea that elves are better at everything humans do […] I have a friend who plays all his characters in every game as an elf, and I'm pretty sure he has some form of narcissistic personality disorder. [Male, 25, Australia]

Thus it has been argued that race reflects a quality attributed to the player who espouses a preference for them, while this quality is also reinscribed by the game's narrative, which was noted above in relation to the Lalafell and Roegadyn. Other players made similar claims to Kain, such as Auron's assertion that they were often

"whiny, emo wastes of air" based on their forum contributions. Boellstorff (2008) noted how Second Life residents believed avatar appearance was revealing of their "true" personality. This notion is contested by Shapiro (2010) who expressed concern at the high number of white avatars, and an absence of chubbier, shorter, less attractive avatars. Residents seemed to project a much more idealised version of themselves into Second Life (Shapiro, 2010). By returning to the notions of authenticity and meta-roleplay, a more fruitful approach can be achieved.

Race in this instance is held to be part of authentic identity through the body of the avatar, yet the meta-roleplay aspect of race is effectively ignored in much of the literature. Other players have already pointed to how the avatar can affect interaction with others and their performance as a particular avatar. It may well be that players who are arrogant may be drawn to the Elezen because of their history and the personality attributed to them, yet the potential for meta-roleplay performance remains important. Returning to Butler (1993), interpellation remains important, where other players assume Elezen *will* behave in a particular fashion, which leads those who prefer Elezen avatars to perform in specific ways. If an Elezen were to behave otherwise, this could be perceived as out of character. This also represents an alternative way of examining race in games, by looking at how performative identity is shaped by interpellation. It is not just about the lore of the game and its characterisation of a race, but how players internalise these norms and then hail others to perform in particular ways. The ways in which Elves are constituted in game cultures has been extensively documented (Higgin, 2009; Monson, 2012). Yet, players often heed the game's culture less depending on the avatar's embodiment, as noted above in the discussion regarding player stature and avatar size. Hence it is important to consider both the game's culture *and* how players perform as a race,

alongside norms drawn from other areas of offline life. However, the Hyur's human appearance and lack of commonalities with game races mean that they are seen as boring, blank slates.

7.2.2 The Hyur

Figure 36 Two Hyur NPCs, a male Midlander on the left, and a female Midlander on the right.

The existing research tends to neglect the more "human" races in online games, which this section redresses. Above, Laguna suggested the main attraction of the Hyur was the ability to project himself into the game directly. Seymour suggested the following about his Hyur avatar in an interview.

> and yes, i feel the avatar reflects my actual appearance. I can only speculate as to why i feel the need to project myself. Perhaps the need to have an average person do amazing things. [male, USA]

Wakka also sought to recreate his earlier self, from his college days, and project this version of himself into Final Fantasy XIV.

> When making a character in any game, I usually start by making it look as much like me as possible, with a few alterations. I'm 5 foot 10 inches tall in real life, but I'll usually make the character tall. While I'm not in as good a shape as I used to be – I was an athlete through college – I'll usually have the character be pretty buff (if it's any help, I was an American football player, and I actually used to look like Highlander Hyurs look). While I'll usually make the hair color the same as my real life hair, I'll often change the style to something marginally cooler. Maybe make it longer, and add a chin beard. But I generally want to look at the character and believe that it *could* be me, even if it's an idealized version of me. [36, Male, Dallas]

Most of this chapter has pointed to the importance of meta-roleplay and race, yet the Hyur can render offline embodiment much more visible. The desire to project oneself into the game creates a more "realistic" avatar, which has less potential to be as fantastical as the other races. Yet, by inserting oneself directly into the game, an idealised identity emerges, where the player has the potential to achieve things that

would not necessarily be possible in their everyday lives, as suggested by Seymour. Above, Rinoa and Montblanc made similar comments, though they preferred anything but a human avatar. Casting aside everyday life, the players insert themselves into an adventure, offering glamour, excitement and glory, enjoying the escapism so derided by Thornham's (2011) respondents. At the start of this chapter, Zell felt the Hyur were ultimately much more malleable than any of the other races since they were less affiliated with the cultural norms attached to the other races. Nevertheless, many respondents who used Hyur avatars were more concerned with projecting themselves more directly into the game, including Laguna, who did so to be recognised for his achievements. It is important for them to use an avatar that resembles them to feel directly involved in the game.

To this end, the Hyur become the most "authentic" race, where the player chooses to reproduce themselves directly in the game, with the single (idealised) body that holds a single identity being reproduced online, following van Zoonen (2013). Players, like Laguna, emphasised that they were more "true" to themselves in this way. With the other races, it can be argued that the performative identity enacted by the player has to match the avatar's embodiment, thus altering the focus of authentic identity to that of the avatar rather than the player. The Hyur example still suggests that visibility retains significance for some, where the avatar embodiment enables the player to "be themselves", and enact an authentic identity that is more faithful to their offline self, which is made visible by the player who selects this race. Yet, this is still an idealised performative identity and embodiment, such as Wakka's comments about his avatar looking more like his younger, more athletic body. Butler (1990) holds that any kind of identity performance is exactly that, and a particular

type of performance may be emphasised. Yet, the Hyur avatars were cast in a different light by other players, who disliked them.

Other respondents suggested the Hyur were too boring, and did not offer *enough* escapism, such as Rinoa's comments above that she finds human game races too boring. Cecil suggested the following.

> Moving on to the actual question: my character in XIV. There are five races: Roegadyn, Hyur, Miqo'te, Lalafell, Elezen. I don't like the big, beefy look outside of D&D [Dungeons and Dragons] so Roegadyn was out. I don't like playing as overly short characters so Lalafell was out. I usually don't play Humans unless I can find nothing else, so Hyur was out. I had played an Elvaan for five years and wanted something new so Elezen was out. I had contemplated playing a Mithra in XI, so Miqo'te it was [26, Male, Baltimore, Network Administrator]

Cyan also made the following comment when asked how he viewed the other races, though he did in fact favour Hyur avatars himself.

> Hume/Hyur: All kinds of people play the human race. Men and women seem to stick to their genders more when playing a human like race... Can't really discern a certain personality for those that choose Hume/Hyur as their avatar. [29, Male, US]

Some, like Cecil, would do anything to avoid anything too close to being a human deliberately. Players who used Hyur avatars were perceived as dull and unimaginative. At various points in the most recent chapters, it has been noted that players believe the avatar reveals the player's personality, such as the arrogance of

the Elezen. By representing themselves as Hyur, they are deemed to be taking a safe bet and appearing innocuous. As players suggest a fantasy should involve some form of escapism, the Hyur are characterised as too dull for players to consider due to their closeness to human appearance. Though the imaginative approach offered by roleplay is often derided by players, and authentic identity performances are valued, the Hyur are apparently too close to an everyday appearance and too "real". Once again, the players point to how authenticity and meta-roleplay are in tension, limiting the possibilities available to players in terms of embodiment and identity. To some extent, avatar appearance is supposed to reveal some "inner truth" about the player (Boellstorff, 2008), but also encourages a form of meta-roleplay through the player's favoured game race. As discussed above, meta-roleplay has boundaries and is constrained by embodied and cultural norms, such as the notions that are associated with Elves. However, the Hyur do not seem to stimulate the imagination of players enough to warrant such considerations. Instead, they are consigned to being many players' least favourite option.

Nonetheless, the Hyur example offers an insight into how some players feel the need to project themselves more directly into the game than others. As a result, the Hyur can still enable a type of meta-roleplay performance, which is more centred around the player than the avatar. With the other races, meta-roleplay focuses on different aspects of the avatar's embodiment and the cultural norms attached. In the absence of these, the Hyur performance can be fantastical, and the player is capable of great achievements and bold adventures. Like the other players who wanted to play in ways that were out-of-character, or away from their everyday life, the Hyur still offered that opportunity, but the embodiment had to match their own more closely. This is an important point considering that the most humanoid races are often

neglected in the literature, with greater emphasis placed on more exotic races. Nevertheless, players who prefer Hyur avatars consider them in the same vein as Second Life avatars (Shapiro, 2010). Much like Second Life, the appearance of Hyur avatars still tends to be mostly white, with fewer possibilities for a non-white appearance. At this juncture, it is important to move on to how 'race' is excluded from discussions of race by players as part of an attempt to reinforce an escapist fantasy around the social category of 'race'.

7.3 Race or 'Race': The Players' Performative Exclusion of 'Race' From Final 'Fantasy'

In the previous chapter, the missing genders thread was discussed in-depth. Yet, one important facet of the thread still needs to be addressed. It was noted that self-defined female players were happier with the more realistic proportions of the female avatars, yet one player in this thread pointed out that non-white players could not necessarily create an avatar that realistically represented them.

> I realize that the cute wafe-like style is popular among men and women, boys and girls alike… but for those who enjoy stronger representations of the fantasy theme, where is our good time? I've recreated my character a dozen times and would readily play a female Highlander [Hyur] (they are the closest thing to "ethnic" and I am black, so that could be a fun option) or a female Roegadyn. It is true that when a player can not connect to their character, they simply set the controller down or back away from the computer desk. (Post Date: 15th March 2011)

This echoes Cloud's dissatisfaction over the appearances of the avatars, in terms of gender, yet this player frames her dissatisfaction more in relation to 'race'. There are

few options for creating a non-white avatar, since most of the avatars adhere to Caucasian facial features, such as smaller noses. Dietrich (2012) conducted a study of 65 MMORPGs, where he tried to create non-white avatars, including skin tone, facial features and hairstyles. He found that only five of these had enough means of morphing the avatar's appearance to make a non-white avatar, though he only examined Human races and excluded all others. His ultimate conclusion suggests this is a pernicious trend:

> It is one thing to live in a world where most white people live within a white habitus, sheltered from contact with racial and ethnic minorities, but it is quite another to explore, socialise, and play in a virtual world where one is not simply isolated from non-whites, *non-whites simply do not exist.* (italics in original, Dietrich, 2012: 111)

In Final Fantasy XIV, the only way of creating an avatar with a vaguely non-white appearance is to have tanned skin. The races that originate in the desert area of the game are more tanned, with white facial features, though Hellsguard Roegadyn can be black, but less commonly used. In my interview with Barret, I suggested his Hellsguard Roegadyn seemed unusual, and he also agreed that he encountered fewer, compared to the Sea Wolf clan who are pale blue, or green, like my Roegadyn avatar.
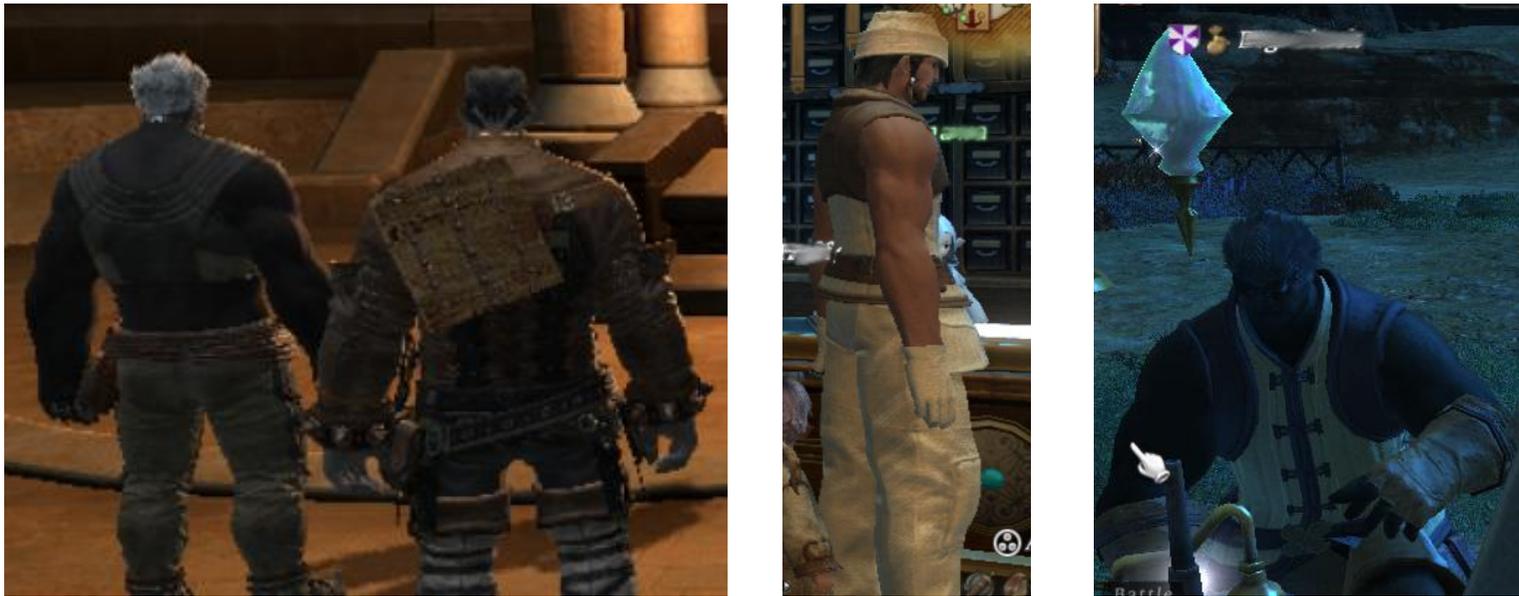
Figure 37 From left to right, the first image has two Roegadyn, the middle is a Highlander Hyur, and the third screenshot is a Roegadyn

Figure 38 In this wide shot, the height and physique differences can be clearly seen, between my avatar Rill and the taller Highlander Hyur and Roegadyn next to her.

Figure 39 On the left is the red version of the Hellsguard Roegadyn, and a paler Highlander Hyur on the right.

With the Roegadyn especially, the main difference is the colour of their skin – very little else is different. The Highlander Hyur are taller than the Midlanders, and more muscular, yet most of the facial features are again very similar with predominantly white facial features. The physique aspect is interesting with the Highlander Hyur, since black men tend to be equated more with physicality and the body (Alexander, 2006), however Dietrich (2012) only examines skin tone, hair and facial features in his study. Daniels and LaLone (2012) noted how certain black characters in the Grand Theft Auto series were more readily reduced to their embodiment than white characters. In this instance, it could be partly where their gender and race intersect, since neither the Roegadyn nor the Highlander Hyur could be played as a female avatar. The Highlander Hyur in particular seems to be more of an attempt at a non-white avatar, yet the muscular appearance of both of these also emphasise a masculine appearance. When I was playing, these particular forms of the races were rarer too, with most opting for paler avatars overall. The game design limits the possibilities in the game for players, with an emphasis on mostly Euro-American facial features, yet the darker skin tones were less common. Much like the Second

Life residents who chose paler avatars (Shapiro, 2010), players ultimately favour whiter avatars in Final Fantasy XIV. At the same time, none of the avatars are coded with racial signifiers in the same way as the Trolls or Tauren in World of Warcraft as outlined by Ritsema and Thakore (2012).

Returning to the forum thread, other players rejected the concerns of the non-white player, by dismissing the need to add any kind of "real" ethnicities. Here the escapist aspect of gaming is privileged above "real" life considerations of 'race', which are believed to hold no meaning online. Nakamura (2002) has documented how many online spaces assume a "default whiteness", whereby everyone is assumed to be white unless they state otherwise (p.33). Despite the growing amount of research into the relationship between 'race' and game race (Higgin, 2009; Everett, 2010; Daniels and LaLone, 2012), gamers still maintain a separation of online and offline, especially with regard to 'race'. One player on the forum claimed avatar appearance was constrained due to budgetary concerns, and such desires were just too "picky", whether it be adding the "missing" genders or more viable non-white avatars, and concluded as follows.

> Manquote [male Miqo'te] and female roegadyns have nothing to do with real life ethnicity. They are *fantasy* races […] But i find (and always found) funny when people bring ethnicity-related arguments into fantasy games anyway. (Post Date: 15th March 2011)

The first player who was quoted above offered a curt response.

> As for that ethnic business, it is a reference place. I bring it up because as an ethnic girl and one with –apparently- unique admirations, I find it difficult to build a character that takes my ideas of an exciting and beautiful world into

the fantasy world of the MMO[RPG]. Which is, lets face it, half the reason that anyone plays an MMO. It is a place where your fantasies, however little and silly, can be enacted to some extent. (Post Date: 15th March 2011)

Chapter two outlined how 'race' can be critically analysed in online games, and how signifiers of 'race' are recognisable. Notably, Higgin (2009) and Galloway (2012) expressed concern about the exclusion of 'race' when talking about race in online games. Races become encoded with signifiers that can be traced from racial stereotypes. Yet, players determinedly attempt to frame the online game as a reified space away from offline life. Nevertheless, this study has shown that this is not the case, alongside the other emergent literature in this area. Earlier in this chapter, the notion of fantasy was examined, where players discussed the desire to become something more fantastical in online games. I emphasised that fantasy has its limits, due to the opinions of other players and the game design, which is certainly the case here too. (Final) Fantasy remains overwhelmingly white. Yet, players bring 'race' and racism to the game's spaces in other ways, despite claiming otherwise, which can be seen in the reactions of Euro-American players to Japanese players.

The official forum sometimes featured arguments over the actions of Japanese players. If players are looking for a group to play with, they advertise in the local chat channel, which is broadcast in the immediate area. Japanese players often add "Jpn only" to the end of such requests, suggesting that they do not want to play with anyone else. McLelland (2002) has pointed out that Japanese internet spaces are directed at Japanese users, since Japanese is a difficult language to master, and foreigners may be unwelcome. Consalvo (2012) holds that players of Japanese games may be more interested in Japanese culture as a hobby, which leads her to call them "cosmo-players" (p.199). The forums for Final Fantasy XIV would

occasionally fracture due to arguments over the alleged xenophobia of Japanese players, which enabled players to criticise them.

One of the on-going arguments within the community related to the game's servers, which were all housed in Tokyo, and were not divided by region. Other online games have servers in different regions, partly to increase connection speed in that area. World of Warcraft has regional servers on the West and East coasts of America for North American users, and more in Europe for European players, though players are not just limited to these. For some players, the attraction of playing Final Fantasy XIV is the international servers. Others argued that certain Japanese players were xenophobic towards non-Japanese players, so they should have separate servers to play on. The debate around the server issue was repeated over the course of the forum observation period. One player stated the following.

> BTW [By the way] there is a thread over on the Japanese forum about this very same subject and the majority of them want regional servers, because they believe westerners to be rude and greedy. (Post Date: 22nd April 2011)

Another stated:

> SE [Square Enix, the development company] obviously think there is something special about it [keeping international servers] even though the majority of JP [Japanese] players hate us lol [laugh out loud], "JP onry". (Post Date: 22nd April 2011)

Japanese players were framed as judgemental of players from other countries, which would be framed with implicit racism through the use of "onry" instead of "only". Moreover, this was blamed on the Japanese players with *their* poor attitude, who

were perceived as rude. This attitude was deemed prevalent in Final Fantasy XI too, and had become ingrained in the community. Another post told a fairly common tale.

> I left a party [group of players] and a server in ffxiv [Final Fantasy XIV] because of jp there was the rudest players on that world. i google what there saying it everything was about us Gaijin [foreigner]. So i left and said it in JP in a nice way, i death warp[39] and they start looking at me most was lalafalls and /pokeing[40] and lol at me for leaving. I /tell[41] the party leader in jp and told them what happened he told me off so i said ok thanks bye. (Post Date: 16th April 2011)

Such incidents were used to argue for the regional segregation of servers so that the Japanese players could play separately. Japanese players were perceived to be at fault due to their xenophobic attitudes, which permitted Euro-American players to behave in a xenophobic manner towards them. At the same time, other players who enjoyed the international servers framed the desire for regional servers as racist, while siding with the Japanese players, saying that Euro-American players ought to learn Japanese to talk to them, or use Google Translate to make an effort to communicate. The confusion is highlighted in this post.

> So in the end, we are racist coz we want in a international server, people to talk english (i HAD to learn, enough to people understand me) and these talking their own language [the Japanese players], not allowing people join them coz you can not understand them, and having to learn their language, or

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[39] Death warping is a practice where the player deliberately allows a monster to kill them, so that they can travel away from the battlefield immediately, as well as drop out of a party. The avatar is transported to an Aetheryte camp where they can recover safely, though it can be considered rude to do so without warning.
[40] This is an emote, which makes the avatar look as if it is poking at another with a finger.
[41] A "tell" is a private message to another avatar.

use third program/webs to translate to their native language, they, are the victims.

how many times i have to repeat it, i am not against any cultures, or any people, i am against to some people joining a international game, and trying to create a closed community not allowing people to join partys/events/whatever coz you dont meet their language/culture. You can say what you want to defend them, but dont say i am racist or xenophobic, i dont care where u are, i care WHY you dont let me join you. (Post Date: 23rd July 2011)

This on-going squabble, which has persisted for a number of years, points to how 'race' is regularly brought online in various ways by players. It was noted above that 'race' had no place in online games according to players because of their "fantasy" nature. In the course of this particular argument, 'race' and racism were set aside in favour of xenophobia as a term. There are parallels with how World of Warcraft players treat alleged gold farmers, who are vilified by other players (Nakamura, 2009). Chapter five also examined how being able to speak and respond to questions were important for being considered human, but this hinges on being able to speak *English*. Language becomes a signifier of 'race' in the absence of a visible body in online spaces (ibid.). Stereotypes of 'race' also become visible in these discussions. Japanese introversion was cited as a reason for their behaviour by some players for example, which was attributed to Japan's history as a formerly closed society. The xenophobic behaviour of certain Japanese players is perceived as excusable due to historical precedent, whereas the xenophobia or racism of Euro-American players complaining about Japanese players is problematic. This discussion also suggests that different ways of examining 'race' in online spaces can be found via such

threads. Chapter three put forward the idea that 'race' had been neglected in online game research, and suggested how this could be remedied. Online communities continue to reflect and reinforce offline prejudices, which I also highlighted in the previous chapter with regard to gender. In this way, it becomes more pressing to examine how online continues to be shaped and informed by offline life, and moving beyond the view that the internet is somehow separate.

7.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has shown how game race deserves greater levels of attention in the existing research. Firstly, players may select a similar type of race for continuity between games as they become attached to one in particular, or to reflect a particular aspect of themselves, whether the relationship with their partner, or their embodiment. Race in a game can be a way of signifying an aspect of identity to others via the avatar's body project, much like the discussion of equipment in chapter five. Players may thus choose to make particular aspects of their identity visible within the game, which is interesting considering the concern about the internet rendering the user invisible. It could be argued that players attempt to make parts of themselves visible online to varying degrees, and race is the easiest way to do so.

Secondly, the chapter examined the notion of meta-roleplay in relation to race, which respondents claimed enabled them to access an alternate performative identity. Nevertheless, it was argued that meta-roleplay is limited by the five races and the stereotypes associated with them. Consequently, players are interpellated into particular ways of enacting a performative identity associated with their avatar race. Two particular races, the Elezen and the Hyur, were examined to perceive how

stereotypes become attached to races and constrain the players' performative identity. This study makes an important contribution to the much-neglected area of game race by exploring the relationship between the game narrative, stereotypes attached to races, and how these affect the enactment of performative identity.

Finally, the chapter examined 'race' in online games, which has been neglected. In the previous chapter, homophobia was argued to be evidence of the control fantasy that such games enable. Homosexuality was excluded from conversation by certain players, who claimed it has no place in games. 'Race' was framed similarly, as something that does not belong in an online game. Yet, players cannot create non-white avatars, which points to how 'race' has to be framed as white in this space. Implicit racism was also noted in the way in which Japanese players were discussed in certain threads, as well as the on-going argument over whether the Japanese players were being xenophobic or just plain rude. Regardless of the claims that 'race' has no place in games, players continue to assume others are white, and perpetuate racial stereotypes. 'Race' remains a divisive issue online and clearly warrants much more attention. The study makes a contribution to sociological knowledge of identity, and how 'race' can structure online social interaction where the body is seemingly less visible. The following chapter is the conclusion, and examines the contributions made by the thesis, and reflects on the process of conducting research in an online game.

Chapter 8 Conclusion: Performative Identity and Embodiment in Online Games –
Reflections and Future Possibilities

This concluding chapter brings together the threads of the previous chapters and revisits the themes of the thesis. At its core, the thesis locates the relationship between performative identity and embodiment in online gaming and related spaces in various ways. Chapter two set out the limitations of the existing research upon which the thesis sought to build. There has been a distinct lack of sociological research into video games, especially online gaming, however I argue that a sociological approach is invaluable to understanding the culture of gaming, ranging from the subculture around gaming as a hobby and particular games, as well as the values embedded in gaming communities and game development. Academic research tends to focus on the risks posed by gaming. In the research into online gaming, intersections of identity remain under-researched and deserve greater attention, to which this thesis has contributed by examining gender, sexuality and 'race'/race. By examining the norms attached to these, and how these norms are policed online, the constraints on the enactment of performative identity and the possibilities for embodiment can be perceived. This final chapter is divided into the following sections. Firstly, the research questions and the contributions made by the thesis are revisited. The second section consists of a reflexive passage on being a gamer and conducting research. Finally, the possibilities for future research following this study are put forward.

8.1 Revisiting the Thesis Themes and Contributions

Firstly, the research questions must be re-examined to set out how the thesis has redressed the limitations of existing research and contributes new sociological

knowledge. The original three questions outlined in the introductory chapter were as follows:

1. How is online identity performed and embodied?

2. How do notions of authenticity shape the possibilities for performative online identities?

3. How do heteronormativity, gaming culture, and stereotypical notions of game race and the social category 'race' shape the possibilities for online, embodied, performative identities?

Initially, the answers are recapped, followed by how they contribute to sociological knowledge. In chapter five, I argued that online identity must be viewed as performative and embodied, and can be accomplished in different ways depending on the 'bandwidth' available. In a 'low bandwidth', text-based online space, such as forums, the user relies on performative statements enacted through posts. A 'high bandwidth', embodied online space enables a broader range of expressions that draw on offline understandings of social interactions, such as emotes and various types of chat. Different registers can be used to 'speak' in various ways, either as the avatar or themselves. The embodied avatar becomes a site for the enactment of identity, where players use it in many ways, such as a means of projecting themselves directly into the game by replicating aspects of their corporeal embodiment, ranging from physical size to their entire appearance. In this way, the avatar is treated like a body project (Shilling, 2012) by the player. When interacting with others, the player makes use of their existing embodied knowledge (Hayles, 1999) in negotiating emotes, and traversing the game's environment, for example. All of these points demonstrate that internet use is profoundly embodied and that the relationship between mind and body is complex.

Throughout the analysis chapters, I argued that authentic identity is important for understanding how, even online, with an avatar, players often assumed an avatar represented a player's 'inner self' because of how a single body is believed to hold a single identity. I have juxtaposed this notion with claims regarding meta-roleplay, which my respondents used to tap into the fantastical side of the game. The avatar thus holds a contradictory position in the opinions of players. Authentic identity remains fundamental to the experience of social interaction in Final Fantasy XIV where it becomes bound up with heteronormativity and norms attached to game race. On the one hand, the *player* is tested for adherence to heteronormative gender through the avatar, where the avatar's gender must match the player's sex. The game's community also polices gender by mocking and deriding those who fail to match up to this proscription. On the other hand, the *avatar* is scrutinised closely with regard to the norms attached to its race, which means its performative identity enacted through emotes and speech must match the normative expectations of its race.

This leads into the third question. The findings point clearly to a range of constraints on online, embodied, performative identities in Final Fantasy XIV. Heteronormativity is certainly important in the testing of authentic identity, but also leads to a policing of sexuality. Homophobia remains a problem in gaming culture, especially where heterosexual players overly emphasise the escapist aspect of play in order to exclude Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) players and discussions of sexuality. Moreover, it also shapes the possibilities for the avatar's embodiment, where larger female and slight male avatars are seen as non-normative. Gaming culture is important in portraying oneself as a 'good' gamer, such as keeping to certain rules in the game, or those derived from gaming culture, more widely, for

example around the use of appropriate equipment. The player's relationship to gaming and their history of gaming affects how they choose their avatar, especially if they seek continuity with their avatar. Authenticity and game race are related, but it is also important to consider how other aspects of game race are limiting. The player is always constrained by the game design itself, where Final Fantasy XIV only features five races, and the 'missing genders' thread discussed in chapter six shows how frustrating this narrow selection can be for players. Meta-roleplay encourages players to reflect on the avatar's race and how it would behave if it were 'real', yet the relatively small number of races and the opinions of other players means that the *actual* scope of meta-roleplay afforded by race is fairly narrow. Despite the claims of some players (especially on the forum), 'race' still has a presence online, particularly via implicit and explicit racism. Final Fantasy XIV is widely defined by its players as an escapist, fantasy game, which for some means 'race' should not be an issue. This translates into a 'whitening' of MMORPGs, where non-white appearances are not viable, and deemed unimportant. The particular arguments in Final Fantasy XIV between different groups of Euro-American players about the behaviour of Japanese players also perpetuate racism online. Such tendencies continue the notion of 'default whiteness' (Nakamura, 2002) by discouraging players from signifying their ethnicity online.

The following examines the contribution of the thesis to sociological knowledge from three perspectives: substantive, methodological and theoretical. In substantive terms, the findings contribute to the under-developed sociological understandings of online practices and spaces, especially around online games. Online gaming remains popular with millions of players and certainly has the potential to yield insights into social interaction in online environments. Chapter two examined the existing

literature in the area of gaming and how certain aspects warranted further research from a sociological viewpoint. This includes gender, sexuality, and race/'race', which have all received mixed attention. Few studies have examined all three of these together. Additionally, there are certain key areas from each of these that contribute to particular debates. With regard to gender, the study explores how gender can be 'done' in different online spaces and according to the wishes of the user. One important example concerns the findings about men using female avatars, which is a much neglected area. This study extensively discussed particular cases of self-defined male players using female avatars, despite pressure not to do so, and their accounts of the relationship between their offline and online gender. In the case of sexuality, the study considers the ways in which sexual norms are integrated into online spaces, perpetuating homophobia and constraining the possibilities for embodiment and identity in online games. The research into game race remains under-developed, especially its relationship to 'race' as a social category, yet this study sets out how race is an important intersection of identity in online games and structures social interaction in many ways.

From a methodological perspective, the study also contributes to the body of literature concerning online research methods. In the course of the fieldwork, the study has generated an original and rich dataset, which is the product of an innovative approach to online research methods. The case was put forward in chapter four to examine how visual methods have the potential to expand online research methods further, through the use of image elicitation in online asynchronous interviews, which, to the best of my knowledge, has not been recorded elsewhere. By using images from the game, a greater level of clarity could be achieved in the interviews, and such an approach could easily be adopted in other online research.

The study also contributes to the literature concerning (online) ethnography by mapping how this research project was accomplished in a reflexive manner, and the sociological debates around online research.

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to debates around particular theoretical ideas. Drawing on the work of Butler (1990, 1993), this study sets out how performative identity can be used in studies of online games, coupled with the notion of authentic identity (van Zoonen, 2013). Chapter three suggested that the research into online gaming was relatively under-theorised, as was the literature concerning online identity and embodiment. This study has sought to redress this imbalance by putting forward a theoretical framework to enrich and broaden the debates around online identity and embodiment by examining more closely how identity is accomplished in an online game and its related spaces, such as forums, and the tension between the prevailing need for 'authentic' identities and the desire for meta-roleplay. For example the thesis has put forward alternate ways of conceptualising internet use as embodied through the avatar body project, and the use of embodied knowledge in online social interaction.

8.2 Reflections on Being a Researcher Player

Throughout this study, I have emphasised my own role as a player, but spoken little of it. In chapter four, I outlined the epistemological position of the thesis as poststructuralist, and the importance of the researcher situating herself reflexively in the research. This section returns to this theme by reflecting on my own background in relation to my respondents' and the experience of researching an online game. During interviews, I was constantly struck by how my respondents had had similar gaming experiences to me, partly perhaps because we were of a similar age. Zidane

and I talked about growing up playing Sega MegaDrive games; Cait Sith and I talked about anime we had both watched; Cyan and I talked about anime and various games. Nearly all of them talked about Final Fantasy with me as a series. Over the years, I have played 14 Final Fantasy games, the first being Final Fantasy VII in the late 1990s, which was the first one released in Europe. My brother actually bought it, and I had to wait until he was finished with it until he would let me near it. This remains a popular entry in the series, and represents the pinnacle of its success, to which every title since is compared and mostly found wanting. Even now, I have a soft spot for Final Fantasy games, despite their waning success. As I finish this thesis, Final Fantasy XIV is about to re-launch as Final Fantasy XIV: A Realm Reborn. Following its lack of critical success, a restructuring of the game was announced four months after its original release. The game has been offline, except for testing, since November 2012, and resumes again in its new state in late August 2013. Final Fantasy XIV was widely blamed for damaging the reputation of the Final Fantasy series as a whole, and the development company, Square Enix, has suffered considerable financial losses as a result of the lost investment and extra costs needed to rectify the problems of the Final Fantasy XIV (Nunneley, 2011). Many fans of the series, myself included, have mixed feelings about this particular title. One online commentator suggested recently that Square Enix ought to consider retiring the series as they keep on tarnishing its reputation further, or more effectively revamp the series as a whole (Schreier, 2013). This study thus comes at a difficult time for Final Fantasy as a series, though new console, single-player titles are due for release in the next six months.

But what about conducting research into games, as a gamer, and involving play in the research process? When asked about my research, a common response is surprise

that I can incorporate playing games into "work" – "so you get to play games all day? Jealous!" was one response, for example. However, in undertaking "serious" academic work in this area, it takes the shine off the experience of play in some ways, but can lighten the academic endeavour in others. Rather than entirely becoming engrossed in the game, I found myself trying to stay alert for interesting events, watching other players go about their play, interesting points in the narrative, and lining up screenshots for analysis and interviews. It also becomes harder to capture the *feeling* of play in writing. When something goes well – a battle goes as planned that had been tried repeatedly before and failed, making a tricky item, a new area reached that you thought off-limits – it can be immensely satisfying, but difficult to explain, and left me wondering whether such material ought to make it into an academic study. One example of this was in the wealth of material from the interviews that were about the game, which did not find their way into the analysis as such.

When swapping stories with my respondents about the game, Barret and I talked about a region of the game that was relatively uninhabited and something of a mystery, called Coerthas. He remarked that it was one of his favourite regions of the game, whereas I had never found the "right" way to it, and kept being killed on my previous attempts to get there by dangerous monsters. He told me about a route I had not realised existed, and I was delighted to finally see the area as it was so pretty, but oddly empty since the game's narrative did not seem to include this area. The next time I messaged Barret during the interview I thanked him for telling me how to get there and we talked more about some of the strange features in the landscape that seem to indicate the developers had planned to include Coerthas at some point in the future. When playing a game, these are often some of the most pleasurable moments

– finding something new or unexpected, sharing it with someone else – but were sadly lacking in Final Fantasy XIV, especially when I felt the need to focus on "serious" research.

Equally, such moments can act as a tonic to work, for example being able to spend time in the game as a way to alleviate writer's block. While being able to easily pass the time in the game, it is easy to continue with an aspect of research at any given time, or indeed indulge in some less serious play. Rather than organising a visit to a field site, it has been much easier to simply login to the game to revisit somewhere, or check on the forum to see how discussions are progressing. Simply trying to enjoy play as a gamer can also be a relief in itself, by becoming so engrossed in something other than research that I lose track of time and enjoying the playful aspects of gaming.

Simultaneously, this creates a boundary issue: where does research end and play begin? I cannot perceive this as a clear-cut question as such, but offer the image posed by Grosz (1994) – the Möbius strip. "Gamer" and "researcher" cannot necessarily be separated in a distinct manner for me. At times, I am more researcher than gamer, such as when writing, or giving conference presentations, though I bring the game into both of these. On other occasions, the emphasis switches, where I spend more time at play, which can still be productive, but more for my own satisfaction. In some ways, this has also complicated my relationship with other games at times. I continue to regularly play Xbox 360 games, and often find myself carrying over "research" ideas while playing other games, considering my own relationship to the events on-screen, and how the game can be examined sociologically.

8.3 Future Possibilities: Directions for Further Research

The remainder of this chapter outlines three possible directions for further research. Initially, some of the potential for image elicitation in online research is examined and how it can be used in other online spaces. Then, the repercussions of authentic, heteronormative identity are analysed in relation to other online games and spaces. Finally, this study put forward how games and gaming culture need to be examined together rather than separately, so it is apt to explore how other games could benefit from such an approach.

One of the key contributions from this research was the development of image elicitation in online interviewing. Using screenshots, players were interviewed asynchronously to discuss avatar creation, as well as their experiences in the game. In chapter four, the potential for this type of interview was briefly noted, in regard to Facebook for example. Facebook users routinely upload photos, as well as other types of social networking. There is scope for sociologists to use such photos in social research in the form of online photo elicitation, given how readily photos are uploaded to the likes of Facebook. Given that Facebook has existed since 2005, it is likely that users have the best part of ten years' worth of photos uploaded to the site, which could enable a life history interview, for example, which is one of the common uses of photo elicitation in offline settings (Hirsch, 1999). Online photo elicitation could thus potentially be used in a variety of different settings, and is a useful research method.

Van Zoonen's (2013) concept of authentic identity was initially framed in relation to various websites, such as Amazon and Facebook, where the authentic identity enables companies to direct advertising to a user based on certain characteristics.

This study has sought to develop this idea in relation to online games by considering its relationship to heteronormativity. Future research could examine this notion in relation to other games. Moreover, other research has suggested that gender remains important online, as noted in chapter two (Bassett, 1997; Danet, 1998; Kendall, 2000). Another possible research direction is thus examining how heteronormative gender structures other online spaces, such as forums, as well as how authentic, performative identity can be enacted in a wider range of online spaces. Authentic identity, when coupled with heteronormativity, provides a way to examine gender online, as well as identity.

This study has also outlined the importance of examining a video game in relation to players and gaming culture. In chapter two, research into gaming was highlighted that focused on the reproduction of problematic stereotypes in games like the Grand Theft Auto series (Leonard, 2006). While such research is important to expose how games are still the product of game designers' assumptions about the social world, the ways in which players interact with such games is also important, such as how players actually internalise the norms from such games, and what the possibilities are for players to learn from the experiences of playing such games. This would represent a way of examining video games, whether online or not, in a sociological fashion, and could be a useful direction for future studies of gaming. For example, such an approach could include studying a game and the norms that underpin the game, as well as how players talk about the game, either in online spaces, such as blogs, YouTube videos, forums, or social networking, or in offline conversations.

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<u>Appendix I – Message to Moderators</u>

The below is the message that I sent to moderators of three forums when looking for interview respondents.

Hi, I was wondering if you could help me. My name is Emma Hutchinson and I am a PhD student in the Sociology department at the University of Warwick in the UK. My research interest is in online games and gender, with regard to how players choose the characters and the relationship they have with their avatar. My e-portfolio at the University can be found here [http://go.warwick.ac.uk/emmahutchinson] and I have been playing Final Fantasy XIV as Rill Farstrider on Cornelia and Lindblum servers. I was hoping that it might be possible for me to place a request on the forum about contacting people for interviews or short chats. Any help that you can offer would be greatly appreciated. Many thanks.

<u>Appendix II – Draft Interview Schedule</u>

1. Can you tell me a little about yourself, such as age, sex, location, and about your avatar(s) in Final Fantasy XIV?

2. What factors are important for you when creating a new avatar? For example, lore, race, gender, class, previous experiences in MMORPGs?

3. Why do you enjoy MMORPGs? Have you played any others?

4. Are you currently in a Linkshell?

5. How does your avatar influence your gameplay? Have you ever roleplayed for example? Would you ever play the game differently based on the avatar's race and the lore behind it for example?

6. Is avatar appearance important to you? Is the physical appearance of a particular race important to you? With gear as well, is the look of it important, or is it more about practicality?

7. How do you decide on the gender of your avatar?

8. Have you ever used alts [alternate avatars that are seen as secondary] and what purposes do you use them for?

9. How do you use emotes in the game? Are they important for communication for example, or are they more for fun purposes, such as posing together in a group?

10. Do you pass judgement on people based on their avatars? For example, if you met an *insert race here*, would you react to them based on the lore of the game or previous in-game experiences?

11. (For former Final Fantasy XI players) Would you consider going back to FFXI and if so why?