

# “I Will Own You”: Accountability in Massively Multiplayer Online Games

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[tvnm.sagepub.com](http://tvnm.sagepub.com)**Carol Stabile<sup>1</sup>****Abstract**

Although most massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) remain entrenched in a binary system of gendered avatars, the limited representational framework of avatar creation is only one among many different strategies for what sociologists refer to as “doing gender.” This essay explores how a doing gender approach might be useful for analyzing the interactive dimensions of gender play in the rich communicative environments of MMOs. Specifically, this essay explores how players do (or do not) hold one another accountable to sex category membership through their interactions, in so doing either reproducing or resisting normative forms of gender. A doing gender approach, I argue, holds out the promise of being held accountable to a different set of rules for doing gender—of doing gender differently or, in a more utopian sense, perhaps doing away with it altogether.

**Keywords**

avatars and agents, feminism, fandom, queer, virtual worlds, video games

In 2006, a poster on the Not Addicted Forums began a thread called “Girl, /Ignored.” Full of nerdy references to popular culture, the thread combined the title of the 1999 film *Girl, Interrupted*, with a reference to the command—/ignore—used in the massively multiplayer online game (MMO) *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) to block messages from annoying or offensive players. In posts full of bawdy and improbable references to breasts, cats, tampons, and Auction House scams, poster “Minkyboodle” claimed that other *WoW* players refused to believe that “she” was a girl (hence /ignore) and that

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“she” couldn’t, for the life of “her,” figure out why. The “next time you question if I’m a girl,” Minkyboodle added, “I will own you—just like your gender used to legally own mine.”

In the nearly four hundred responses to “Girl, /Ignored,” posters alternately scolded Minkyboodle for the disservice they was doing their gender, asked to see their breasts, expressed skepticism that they was a girl, or engaged in a wide range of often quite funny and playful repartee.<sup>1</sup> Of course, there really was no way of knowing whether Minkyboodle was who they claimed to be, whether they was either hot or smart, or whether their persona was instead a caricature of the lengths to which male players would go to persuade other players that they were in fact “real” girls.

Although most MMOs remain entrenched in a system of binary gender insofar as players can only choose one of two genders for their avatars (hereafter referred to as toons), the limited representational framework of toon creation is only one among many different strategies for what sociologists refer to as “doing gender” in these environments. In this essay, I explore how a doing gender approach can help us understand the interactive dimensions of gender play in the rich communicative environments of MMOs. Specifically, I am interested in how players do (or do not) hold one another accountable to sex category membership in the game to reproduce or resist normative forms of gender. A doing gender approach, I argue, holds out the promise of accountability to a different set of rules for doing gender—of doing gender differently or, in a more utopian sense, perhaps doing away with gender altogether.<sup>2</sup>

## Gender and Online Games

Over the past twenty years, scholars have produced a rich body of research about gender identity in online games and persistent virtual environments like *Second Life*.<sup>3</sup> Early research on virtual realms focused on gender swapping, often adopting the language of moral panics about identity, deception, and Internet use that permeated the culture in which these early discussions took place.<sup>4</sup> Scholars writing about multiuser dungeons (MUDs) like Amy Bruckman (1993), Howard Rheingold (1993), Allecquere Roseanne Stone (1996), and Sherry Turkle (1997), and journalists like Julian Dibbell (1999) and Lindsay Van Gelder (1990) wrote about men who created female avatars or personae to interact online for largely nefarious purposes. People like these weren’t playing per se: they were “tricking” or “conning” other players for monetary gain (of either virtual or real-world varieties), for psychological or sexual advantage, for sport, or, perhaps most contradictorily, to act “out their own (latent or otherwise) homosexual urges or fantasies” (Rheingold 1993, 172).

Like moral panics in general, these accounts of online gender rested on a nested set of often sexist assumptions about women and new media, in which the putative victims of gender deception were invariably real-life women.<sup>5</sup> The narrative construction of these accounts told a predictable tale about women’s emotional vulnerability and men’s penchant for taking advantage of that. Men were predators; women their technologically naïve prey. The Internet was like one long, dark isolated alley, full of potential sexual threats to women who dared to venture onto it. That real-life women

created male toons either did not occur to many of these early discussants or was considering totally unthreatening to the purportedly natural order of things.<sup>6</sup> Women who gender swapped weren't threats. They simply didn't exist.

There were less negative ways of understanding how participants were communicating about and through gender in these environments. Bruckman (1993, 4) spoke about a male MUDder, "Peter," who told her that "playing a female character has helped him to get in touch with the female side of himself." Turkle's (1997, 216) informant, "Ribbit," similarly claimed that

I wanted to know more about women's experiences, and not just from reading about them . . . I wanted to see what the difference felt like. I wanted to experiment with the other side . . . I wanted to be collaborative and helpful.

Turkle (1997, 211) also described the flip side of male-to-female gender swapping, noting that when she played as a male character, she "finally experienced that permission to move freely I had always imagined to be the birthright of men." For Stone (1996), what she and others described as virtual "transsexualism" took place against a background of liberatory social constructionism: in MUDs, identity could be disarticulated from the limiting physicality of embodied gender. Yet as Caroline Bassett (1999, 13) pointed out, "gender-twisting" on the Internet often wound up being "defensive, or even normative," with those engaging in it simply trading one stereotype for another, assuming that women would be kinder and more authentic because they somehow had biological access to more open forms of communication.

These understandings of online gender were caught on the horns of a feminist dilemma. On one hand, the fascination with males playing as females owed to a kind of cultural incredulity about ceding privilege. Why would anyone want to masquerade as a woman, except to look pretty and use their feminine wiles to take advantage of (straight) men? In this view, the only imaginable reason for a man to play a female character was to deceive, to "game" other participants, and use their deception for purposes of domination and sexual advantage. That playing as a "woman" might be pleasurable was unfathomable, except in the case of pathologized individuals, like gay men. On the other hand, men's assertions that they wanted to play as women to experience collaborative, more emotionally nuanced interactions smacked of the kind of gender essentialism feminists were especially critical of in the 1990s.

More recent approaches to gender identity in persistent virtual environments have emphasized the role-playing dimensions of these spaces to better understand interactivity and player agency in these spaces. For contemporary scholars, "authenticity" and "deception" have ceded to approaches grounded more in play and social construction. Scholars like Derek A. Burrill (2008) and Lisa Nakamura (2002, 2011a, 2011b) used feminist, psychoanalytic, and poststructuralist theories to explore online issues involving gender and race, while Tom Boellstorff (2008) and Taylor (2006, 2012) analyze identity from social scientific perspectives, relying on ethnographic research. With the exception of Taylor's work, much of the research in media studies has focused on representation and textual analysis (looking at toon construction, forum

and blog posts, and fan-produced media), although there is a growing body of quantitative research on player behavior. Literature on how players do gender through their interactions with one another is still scarce, no doubt due to the complexity of collecting qualitative data about player behavior that captures the nuances of these interactions.

Where many qualitative researchers focus on the negative consequences of online identity, documenting the forms of harassment and symbolic violence players encounter in games, this essay borrows from feminist sociologists like Candace West and Sarah Fenstermaker (2002) and Jocelyn Hollander (2013) to suggest that while identities may be “done” in ways that reproduce sexism, racism, and existing class relations, gender accountability also allows for challenges to and reformulations of these. A doing gender approach, that is, allows us to acknowledge the deeply entrenched sexism of online games of the sort experienced by Anita Sarkeesian, whose Kickstarter campaign to fund a series of videos exploring the role of gender in video games became the object of intense online harassment in the spring of 2012. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize and share information about how feminist, anti-racist, queer players, and their allies are fighting back. This has always been a tricky line for feminist media studies scholars to toe—between the critical and agentic utopianism Donna Haraway (1985) wrote of more than twenty-five years ago and the documentation of the various oppressive practices and relations of inequality reproduced in online spaces (Consalvo 2012; Daniels 2009; Higgin 2009; Kolko et al. 2000; Nakamura 2002, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Tu and Nelson 2001).<sup>7</sup> We need both these approaches. An approach that focuses on interaction and gender change may yet help us understand MMOs as laboratories for gender experimentation—of both intentional and accidental varieties—and online anonymity as a strategy that may also enable players to challenge gender ideologies and practices within (and perhaps outside) persistent virtual environments. Unlike the hostile climates and sexual harassment that many of us have experienced in our workplaces, online games do provide strategies for fighting against sexist attacks that real-world contexts do not, particularly in terms of gender accountability. They may give us insights into how to more effectively fight against harassment in our real-life existences.

Although this article primarily engages with theoretical approaches to studying online gender, the insights are informed by six years of participant observation in *WoW* as well as twenty face-to-face interviews that explored issues related to gender with players of MMOs. I began playing *WoW* in 2006, about eighteen months after the game was launched, specifically for the purpose of researching and teaching about gender in online environments. I’ve interacted with thousands of other players, either in guilds (formal organizations of players who play together over time), groups (casual, ad hoc bandings of players on the same server for the purposes of completing a specific quest), pick-up-groups (PUGs; where you are randomly grouped with players from other servers as well as your own), or through chat interactions.<sup>8</sup> I seldom played in player-versus-player mode (where other players can engage you in combat and kill you), but played in player-versus-environment mode, which meant that I could get killed by nonplayer characters and monsters, but not by other players. My research

was conducted on U.S.-based realms, although (depending on schedules) players from Australia and Canada were frequent guild mates and fellow players.

I mention these details because the context in which doing gender takes place is vital to understanding accountability: how one does gender and how one is held accountable to gender in a sports bar when the Pittsburgh Steelers are playing is going to be different from how one does gender at Karaoke night in a local gay bar. Different online games similarly have different cultures of play and communication: a game as vast as *WoW* encompasses divergent play styles and modes of interaction. The culture of MMOs like *WoW*, moreover, is very different than the culture of an online first-person shooter like *Halo*: the possibilities for doing gender in the latter are more limited.

## Doing Gender

Feminist sociologist Jocelyn Hollander (2012, 5) argued that “gender is not something individuals possess. Rather, it is something they ‘do.’” This “doing gender” approach stresses several elements that are helpful to thinking about how gender functions in MMOs. First, “doing gender” is inherently interactive and communicative: we reproduce and challenge gender ideologies through social interactions. As Hollander also points out, we reproduce dominant ideologies of gender through “being held accountable,” where “accountability” refers to the ways in which people evaluate one another in relation to normative gender ideologies in everyday interactions.

Doing gender “consists of the management of conduct in relation to normative conceptions of appropriate attitudes and activities for particular sex category members” (West and Fenstermaker 2002, 540)—anticipating and assessing “attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” and interacting in accordance with these. The management of conduct can be negatively or positively reinforced. On the negative side, when my weeping grade schooler was advised by a girl “to be a man,” the girl was holding him accountable to gender ideologies that understood crying to be unmanly. When girls are told that shouting is not appropriate, they are being held accountable to gender norms that suggest being loud and drawing attention to one’s self is incompatible with being a woman. When football players excoriate each other for being “pussies,” they are holding each other accountable to gendered behaviors that privilege values associated with masculinity, such as a (purported) higher tolerance of pain and distress.

But accountability can also function via affirmation, as in the statement to a woman: “You’ve lost weight,” which is invariably understood as a compliment and affirmation of the importance of thinness to being female and not as an expression of concern over a possible illness. Or consider the utterance, “Boys will be boys” in response to aggressive behavior in male children, which affirms such behavior as a natural part of membership in that sex category. Accountability in all these cases refers to “the ever-present *possibility* of having one’s actions, circumstances, and even, one’s descriptions characterized in relation to one’s presumed membership in a particular category” (West and Fenstermaker 2002, 541, emphasis in original).

For gender accountability to work effectively, it requires compliance on the part of the participant whose behavior is being judged lacking in relation to her or his presumed membership in a gender category. Participants are ashamed of not meeting criteria for masculinity or femininity, they defend their membership in terms acceptable to the status quo, they back down or otherwise concede the interactional terrain. These are positions of powerlessness, in which participants are unable to challenge the criteria to which they are being held accountable. In face-to-face situations, gender accountability is guided by what Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992, 66) described as a feel for the game, directed seemingly naturally by an internalized set of rules about gender and gendered behavior.

Accountability, as feminist sociologists have used it, is rooted in the immediacy of embodied, face-to-face gendered encounters and the often physical shame that aggregates around identities that do not conform to being properly “manly” or “womanly.” The role-playing traditions of online games and the very uncertainty of gender in these domains—the fact that the curvy female blood elf one is playing with may well be a brawny real-life male—alter both expectations and normative practices of accountability. When the game itself is unstable, the rules governing face-to-face accountability are thrown into question. In many ways, MMOs encourage players to be self-conscious about doing gender, given the prevalence of gender swapping and, on some realms, role-playing. *WoW* players in particular tend to be self-reflexive about the fact that they actively and self-consciously do gender, and that they do not passively embody some natural, biological category. In some queerer online spaces with outspoken lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) communities, interactional expectations may be reversed and players who engage in homophobic communications may be held accountable to a quite different set of interactional expectations. In these spaces, the possibilities for gender change can be rich.

## Playing the Game

Gender accountability in *WoW* occurs within a game world that demands a degree of cooperative interaction among players. Players build ties with other players, play with guild members, communicate on public chat, guild chat, and “whisper” to other players to get advice or assistance. The social dimensions of the game design encourage players to cooperate with one another and to develop communication skills that are not always crucial to successful play in other game genres. Players are drawn to this sociability and in the words of one player *WoW* “felt more social than any other game I’ve ever played” (BE 2011, 6). *WoW* ultimately doesn’t reward a player for “being a dick” at least not in player versus environment (PVE) mode, in which other players can’t kill you (DK 2011, 12). In fact, being uncooperative or pugnacious can get you kicked out of groups and guilds alike.

Although there are numerous ways to interact with one another in *WoW*, players generally communicate through text-based chat channels, the primary form of communication in *WoW*.<sup>9</sup> The nature of general and trade chat discourse varies from realm to realm. On the realm Proudmoore, known for being LGBTQ friendly, there is little

tolerance for homophobic comments on public forms of chat, but homophobic comments abound on other realms, such as *Azuremyst*.<sup>10</sup> Players also use voice over Internet protocols (VOIPs), like *Ventrilo* (*vent*). While the players I interviewed frequently used *vent* within their guilds, most of them avoided its use while soloing or interacting with players they did not know.

In-game practices that allow players to group with other, anonymous players feature prominently in how gender gets done in MMOs. Many of the players I interviewed for this project expressed a dislike of PUGs, because of the often unpleasant consequences that follow from interactional expectations of player ability and skill that are often expressed in gendered terms.<sup>11</sup> Less well-gearred or proficient players who join PUGs are often castigated as “wimmens” or gay and references to rape and instances of sexual harassment may occur more frequently in the competitive space of these groups.<sup>12</sup> My own experience of PUGs is quite different. I recently leveled a toon (meaning I advanced it from the lowest or entry level to the highest level then allowable in the game) by PUGing alone and the majority of these PUGs were pleasurable, if highly professional, experiences in which I witnessed very little in the way of harassment, probably because as a more experienced player, I could quickly recognize the warning signs of a toxic group.

Even when players in interactive spaces like PUGs do seek to assert hegemonic forms of gender accountability, these assertions are frequently accompanied by acts of resistance. Players, in a word, fight back. Several players I interviewed told stories of players (both straight and gay) who identify themselves as queer in chat channels to counter homophobic comments or interactions or who challenge casual references to rape. That is, players will inhabit identities that are being criticized to mobilize experiential authority to contest the imposition of normative forms of gender accountability. Sometimes this took the shape of whispering to the homophobic player, identifying as queer, and then asking them to stop. Other players announced to the full group that rape references were unacceptable. As you can’t intentionally kill members of your own group (unlike first-person shooters like *Halo* and *Left for Dead*, in which killing teammates allows for the reproduction of very hostile climates for women, queers, and people of color), there’s little retribution for these acts of defiance. As one player put it, when players in PUGs are “mean to female players,” the female players

get offended and leave and the raid falls apart and everyone calls the guy names because he’s being a jerk. And usually what happens is they boot the guy and they get the girl back because the guy’s a jerk. (GR 2010, 10)

According to Nick Yee’s *Daedalus Project*, men are seven to eight times more likely to play as female characters in *WoW* than women. In other words, one out of every two female characters is being played by a male, while only one out of every hundred male characters is being played by a female.<sup>13</sup> These practices further throw the fixity of gender categories into question. Men and women alike were cagey about disclosing information about their gender, partly because of the element of playfulness it allowed them. One male player said that he made no secret of his gender, but at the same time, he wasn’t

upfront about it. Like I'd let people think what they wanted. But at the same time, like no, I'm a dude. And like the interesting thing though, is that people, as long as I didn't, like, you know, enter into the conversation—dude or not?—pretty much assumed that I was a woman. And especially with the way I talk, I think it just comes over as feminine. (TW 2011, 17)

Because of the preponderance of males playing as females, I found myself less attentive to the physical appearance of toons when I was playing. Instead, I paid more attention to the player's choice of name and communicative style, although on more than one occasion, I found even these to be less than reliable.

These forms of fluidity allow for some interesting examples of resistance. The players I interviewed and many of the players I played with brought into play critiques of what they understood to be the dominant forms of masculinity in these persistent virtual environments. One player summarized this form of masculinity as follows: "the stereotypical computer male pasty basement reject . . . [whose] social skills were stunted, for sake of their lack of interaction . . . immature" (TW 2011, 23). This player offered the following account of his relationship to online masculinity, voicing the often-heard response that he created a female toon because male toons are ugly: "the female mage was totally hot. She had red hair. I could watch her run around all the time. But my primary motivation was just because I hate men. And so it was like an embodiment of that" (TW 2011, 23). Blending arguments about aesthetics and the nature of the male gaze, this player also understood his gender swapping to be a result of his discomfort with masculinity. He objectified his toon (in a sense, his self) who was "totally hot. I could watch her run around all the time," but at the same time, his toon's gender allowed him to experience game play and to interact with other players as if he were female, an aspect of gender swapping that is important for both male and female players alienated from, or critical of, conventional notions of both masculinity and femininity. Gender swapping, it seemed, allowed men in particular to avoid what they understood to be one of the two poles of masculine behavior available to them: the competitive, aggro male gamer versus the "basement reject."

Another player's toon was a healer, a typically feminized role responsible for maintaining the health of other group members and resurrecting them if they die in combat. A good healer makes or breaks a group, saving members a great deal of time and resources. When other group members refused to listen to this player's request that they stop using homophobic language in party chat, she waited until the group was at a particularly inconvenient place to die, provoked the highest level monster in the area, let everyone get killed by it, and then left the group after explaining what she'd done. This wasn't the first time she'd done this, she added, and she did it to send a message to the other players about their behavior (TD 2011, 28).

The gender fluidity of the game also allowed other female players the opportunity to turn the tables, so to speak, and to do gender in ways hitherto reserved for men. Female players' challenges to the system of gender accountability, like the above example, were often deliberate and direct. Although some found that gender swapping allowed them to defy interactional expectations, others insisted on playing their real-life gender to defy those expectations. One twenty-one-year old straight woman, who



exclusively played female toons, said that she thought that it was important to play the game and play it well as a female toon because it communicated a positive message about female identity: that women could be powerful, strong, and excellent players. Gender swapping as a male toon, in her view, was a concession to sexism: “If I have to feel more comfortable or more powerful as a male toon, I feel like that’s not a really safe space for women and it’s not a space I want to be in” (BE 2011, 13). This player had a long history of playing competitive games that have historically been limited to men: she had competed in state-level chess tournaments and she had played football, activities that she considered to be consistent with her identity. In virtual and nonvirtual games, she was accustomed to challenging forms of gender accountability that would have denied her access to competitive forms of interaction.

Other female players observed that *WoW* gives them “a kind of distance” from the accountability used to police and maintain normative gender roles—a license to experiment with what it means to behave as a woman or a man. One female player described her efforts to make her own “queerness more visible,” as a way of resisting the imposition of heteronormativity. She preferred, like a good number of female and queer players, to play Taurens (a race of giant cows) and male blood elves (a race understood to be pretty and queer) because the design of these toons allowed her to play with a “different kind of masculinity.”

I don’t know if other people know that’s what I’m . . . doing, like that’s what’s pleasurable about playing male Taurens for me. It’s like I get to inhabit this masculine space, but it’s really a different kind of masculinity that I like a lot. (TD 2011, 9)

For her, part of the pleasure of the game lies in playing with codes of gender—a “guy who’s so big, who . . . takes up so much space, and then who’s kind of gentle . . . it’s kind of like playing Ferdinand the cow” (TD 2011, 9).<sup>14</sup>

Players who identified in real life (IRL) as queer or transgendered saw their online challenges to interactional expectations about gender as consistent with real-life practices. According to one player, “I’m pretty comfortable with gender swapping as it is, like just in the real world, you know . . . I have a kind of distance” (TD 2011, 15). Another female transgendered player, who was transitioning to male, told me that when he first started playing, his practices could be “called gender swapping, since I identified as female (more out of a lack of knowledge than conscious choice). Now I play my IRL gender. I guess it always was. I just didn’t realize” (RW 2011, 15).

For those accustomed to defying expectations about gender in less physically safe spheres of face-to-face interaction, defiance was an important aspect of game play. Where some might be uncomfortable challenging homophobia in face-to-face situations, the players I interviewed as well as players I encountered in the game often openly defied interactional expectations about heteronormativity in direct ways. Of course, choice of realm and guild often encouraged such openness. One player noted that *WoW* was in fact a less homophobic space than most other games spaces. But, he added, he played on Proudmoore, where “if you say anything like, that’s homophobic or anything, you’re going to get . . . blacklisted” (GR 2010, 29). Interactional

expectations on Proudmoore are quite different than the interactional expectations on other, less queer-friendly realms.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

Gender accountability is grounded in relational, interactive practices that demand attention, in West and Fenstermaker's (2002, 541) words, "to the institutional arena in which those relationships are brought to life." A doing gender approach means theorizing gender IRL and in games as a processual, situated undertaking. There's a tendency in existing research on gender in online environments to assume that identity in the real world is transparent and somehow given—one sees that another person has a beard or breasts and behaves accordingly in one's interactions. Thus, while gamers may practice gender swapping (DiGiuseppe and Nardi 2008; Huh and Williams 2010), the tacit assumption is that real-life forms of gender play are limited to drag performances or cosplay. It may be that from the standpoint of normative gender positions, gender does seem transparent IRL: women are women and men are men and that's that. But for queer feminists, the practices of normative gender are often agonizing and artificial: not at home in either "womanly" or "manly" bodies, we do gender in our everyday, embodied interactions in ways that are every bit as complicated as doing them online.<sup>16</sup> Of course, the absence of an embodied gender presence in MMOs means that we can do gender in some unusual and fairly novel ways and with less anxiety about consequences.

Gender accountability has the additional benefit of directing our attention not to text or discourse alone but to the fields of interactivity through which we enact, confirm, test, and reproduce beliefs about gender. Hollander uses the phrase "interactional expectations" to underscore the mechanisms through which social structures are reproduced. But as Hollander (2013, 26) also pointed out, "changes in interaction . . . have the potential to shift the larger gender system." In these ways, gender accountability allows us to see how challenges and changes to these behaviors can occur. What happens, that is, when interactional expectations are defied, particularly within the persistent virtual environments of MMOs?

I maintain a tempered optimism about the gender change that occurs in MMOs. Many of the players I interviewed spoke at some length about the harassment they had experienced. As one forty-nine-year-old female player put it,

Even though you can just quit, and you do and you go, "I don't need to ever speak to that person again" and that's fine, you know, it still affects you. Probably because you just kind of think, oh God, some people out in the world are just really horrible, aren't they? And that's, you tend to surround yourself with people who aren't horrible, and so in some ways it reminds you that there is this whole kind of other world out there of people who are really ragingly, seriously homophobic, and seriously sexist. (JL 2011, 12)

Online exchanges can be shocking and hurtful, particularly because most of us prefer to engage in leisure time activities with people we don't consider to be horrible. But despite the media's proclivity for stories that reinforce the logic of what

Gibson-Graham (1996, 79) described as “rape space,” or the belief the women are always already potential victims within spaces like these, resistance is also an important part of this landscape.

Feminist media scholars may want to consider anonymity for its liberatory potential.<sup>17</sup> In MMOs, the conditions of anonymity that give rise to sexist or racist online aggression and harassment can also enable resistance to gender accountability and provide rich conditions for gender change. The historical uses of anonymity in U.S. media cultures are much richer and more complex than contemporary discourses allow for.<sup>18</sup>

While anonymity allows for the forms of hate speech and harassment that the Gambit Hate Speech Project (<http://gambit.mit.edu/projects/hatespeech.php>) documented, we also need to consider the possibility that challenges to sexism, homophobia, and racism may be facilitated by the absence of emotional or physical threats that can follow from face-to-face encounters with gender accountability.<sup>19</sup> Remembering perhaps the most important lessons of feminist self-defense, that to take control of spaces, we need to become powerful (Hollander 2004) and queer feminist players need to share information about strategies for fighting back. As Hollander further observes, when “interactions mirror the status quo, they help to solidify the institution as it exists,” but interactions that challenge the status quo can “weaken the current institution, re-creating gender in a new form and opening the door to further change” (Hollander 2013, 26).

These online experiences might effectively translate into the ability to challenge and redefine interactional expectations offline as well. The players I interviewed hinted that their online experiences of exploration, competition, and fighting back against players who would impose normative gender identities upon them had transformed their everyday, material experiences and practices of gender. Of her research, Hollander noted that interactional changes can change individual behaviors and perhaps wider social structures as well, but the extent to which virtual experiences bleed into IRL experiences demands additional research. The U.S. Army believes that virtual experiences like playing *America's Army* can provide preparation for military service. Perhaps feminists might consider these virtual playgrounds as preparation for different kinds of struggles.

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## Author's Note

*Pronoun use:* Throughout this essay, I use “they” in place of the singular pronouns “he” and “she” when referring to online gender identity. Not only does the awkwardness of this construction help draw attention to the instability of these categories in environments where players’ membership in sex categories is uncertain, for reasons explored in the article, the plural “they” more accurately describes online gender identity.

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## Notes

1. Throughout this essay, I use "they" in place of the singular pronouns "he" and "she" when referring to online gender identity. Not only does the awkwardness of this construction help draw attention to the instability of these categories in environments where players' membership in sex categories is uncertain, for reasons explored below, the plural "they" more accurately describes online gender identity.
2. While players are frequently questioned about their in real-life (IRL) gender in *World of Warcraft (WoW)*, and remarks about Chinese gold farmers were frequent in 2006 and 2007, players rarely ask about racial identity (perhaps because they mistakenly assume that all players are white). Accountability may also be a useful analytic for thinking about race in games, although it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this.
3. For a comprehensive and incisive review of the literature on identity in virtual worlds, see Boellstorff (2008, 118-150).
4. See boyd and Jenkins (2006), boyd (2008), Cassell and Cramer (2007), and Hasinoff (2012) for discussions of moral panics and social media.
5. See Van Gelder (1990), Dibbell (1999), and Rheingold (1993).
6. From the earliest days of text-based multi-user dungeons (MUDs), gender swapping was understood to be a practice largely limited to men. See Bruckman (1993), Dibbell (1999), Rheingold (1993), and Van Gelder (1990).
7. Scholars like Oh and Gajjala (2012), McRae (1997, 73-86), and Paasonen (2005, 105-120) on additional utopian possibilities. See also the important conversations taking place on game-related blogs by progressive gamers: *The Border House* (borderhouseblog.com), *WoW Ladies* (wow-ladies.livejournal.com/), and *Geek Feminism* (geekfeminism.org) to name just three.
8. Williams et al. (2006) provide an account of guild organization and function. See also Nardi (2010) and Taylor's (2006) definitive *Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture*.
9. There are different channels for chat in the game, ranging from "general chat," which is seen by all players in a given zone, to "trade chat," which is typically limited to the game's major cities, to "yell channel," which is viewable only to players within 300 yards of your toon. Guild chat is viewable only by other guild members, as is group (or party) chat. A player can also engage in private conversations by "whispering" to another player.
10. Proudmoore's reputation as a queer-friendly realm was established after Blizzard Entertainment banned a gay-only guild on Proudmoore. A subsequent court case ruled in favor of the claimants and Blizzard was forced to change its policy.
11. Blizzard introduced its Dungeon Finder feature in 2009, which allows players to enter their names into queues for five-person dungeons and group with players from other realms. For

- many players, this negatively impacted their play experience, because it detracted from meeting and grouping with other players on one's own realm and made players less able to screen before joining pickup groups.
12. I do not play "player versus player" (PVP) mode nor have I spent a great deal of time in the PVP environment of battlegrounds on *WoW*. Conversations with other players and my interview subjects suggest that these environments also tend to be more broadly sexist and homophobic play spaces than the comparatively vanilla space of player versus player (PVE) environments.
  13. See Yee (2012) on gender bending, as well as Hussain and Griffiths (2008), MacCallum-Stewart (2008), and Huh and Williams (2010).
  14. She was referring to Munro Leaf's (1936) children's book, *The Story of Ferdinand*, a book about a pacifist bull who refuses to fight.
  15. In my experience, racism on trade chat is shut down very quickly, usually by other players but sometimes by game masters. *WoW*'s code of conduct bans racist and homophobic language: <http://us.battle.net/en/community/conduct>).
  16. This may be the singular—albeit unintentional—lesson of psychoanalysis: that the existing gender system was built by and for white male heterosexuals for whom sexual development is a pretty simple, straightforward manner. For anyone else, it is a train wreck.
  17. Of course, this is, as Pierre Bourdieu would remind us, resistance within a set of fundamental constraints. Although *WoW* specifically states that gender is merely an aesthetic choice in the game world, it is still true that all MMOs, in West and Fenstermaker's terms, take for granted "that there are two and only two sexes" (2002, 540).
  18. One need only look to the Federalists and African Americans like Benjamin Banneker who anonymously authored almanacs and other forms of ephemera to think about the importance of a radical tradition that was alternatively anonymous and pseudonymous. Accountability, as journalists use the term, has never protected the rights of people of color, women, and queer folk.
  19. Gender nonconformists often pay a high price in physical violence for their refusals to conform and their defiance of interactional expectations. See Nestle (1997, 159-161) for a moving illustration of this point.

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