

Gender Swapping in World of Warcraft:

A look into personal relationships and gender identity in the gaming environment

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Introduction

Massively multi player online role-playing games (MMORPGs) are virtual environments that allow thousands of players to come together at one time to interact, fight monsters, and solve challenges. Role-playing in particular offers some unique benefits and opportunities that are not spared in its virtual equivalent. Gender-swapping, that is when a player chooses to play as a character that is the opposite gender of him or her is one of those benefits. This study will explore the phenomenon of gender-swapping, looking for the diverse reasons players may have to assume an identity so extremely opposite of their own. The purpose of this research is to answer the question “Why do people gender-swap in MMORPGs and how does that effect their interpersonal relationships within the game?” In order to answer this question it has been broken into three parts. First, how does gender-swapping affect the player in a casual group? Second this study looks at how gender swapping affects a closer group; in game these groups are called guilds. Last will be a quick analysis of class, the chosen job (i.e. Mage, Priest) taken on by a player in order to perform within their group; and group roll, the players job as either one who takes damage, deals damage or heals the group; as a form of non-verbal communication within the game.

Literature Review

Gender Swapping, as first explained in the study conducted by Griffiths, Davis, and Chappell (2003) is when a player within the context of the gaming environment plays as a gender opposite of his or her own. When broke apart, previous studies offer some opportunities to expand on the original exploration of this topic. It was previously shown that although Gender Swapping is common, a large portion of previous samples were North American (Griffiths, Davis, and Chappell, 2004). It has also been shown that certain genders prefer certain rolls within a group in online gaming environment (Companion, Sambrook, 2008) but that previous hypothesis had never been specifically tested against a group of players who were playing as the opposite gender.

Part of the methods used for this research was constructed using the techniques brought forth in an earlier study of the same topic (Hussain, Griffiths, 2008); a survey using self-selected players form multiple recourses. Special attention was given to players who were above 29 years old due to research showing that older players, typically above 27, show less addiction to MMORPGs then people below 27 (Smahel, Blinka, and Ledabyl, 2008). Due to the small sample sizes, information from the study conducted by Cole (2008) was used for the purposes of comparison.

Method

A ten question survey was introduced and ran for eleven days using the web-page “Survey Monkey.” Half of the survey was quantitative, including questions about age, player and character gender, country, in game class and group roll. The second half was qualitative asking questions about why the player chooses to swap gender in game; how gender-swapping effects casual play with random people in dungeon groups including what gender the player represents themselves as in game as a whole; and last how gender-swapping effects relationships in the guild environment. Participants in this survey were self-selected. The survey was distributed by way of an online forum and through

social networking web-pages. Previous attempts to post up the survey on www.worldofwarcraft.com, and www.mmo-champion.com failed, in both cases the moderators would not return emails sent to them requesting permission to post on their forums and when it was assumed you did not need permission and the survey was posted anyway, the post was deleted immediately. The only successful advertising of the survey happened on www.wowhead.com; because the other pages refused, the social networks www.tumblr.com and www.facebook.com were used instead to spread the link around. Out of 115 surveys 21 were removed due to disqualifications (all of them people taking the survey that did not gender-swap and then gave up half way through). There were then 94 eligible surveys, 48 of which filled out the second page of the survey.

Interviewees were intended to be selected using the final question on the survey: the option to leave an email address to opt into the chance to be interviewed, out of the 95 eligible surveys 16 opted into the opportunity to be interviewed. However all but one interviewee from the survey met complications and became unavailable so other interviewees had to be selected. Interviews were constructed using the completed surveys (for those interviewees who took the survey) or exploratory questions (for those who did not take the survey) as research into these player's experiences and then tailoring each interview more or less to the individual. One interviewee was selected because of her lengthy submission on the survey and the fact that she was the only person who said that their groups were affected by gender-swapping. The second interview conducted was not with a person from the survey but instead a table-top gamer; the addition of a role-player who also plays pen and paper games adds depth to gender swapping that may be absent or hidden too well within a virtual world. A final interview was conducted with another player who had not taken the survey, he was chosen both because he was a more casual gamer than the others and also simply because he was male.

Findings and Discussion

Why do some players play characters of the opposite gender in World of Warcraft and how does that affect their relationships with other players? This question for the sake of understanding the virtual environment was broken into several parts. The first part dealt with interactions within a tight social group, in this case a guild. A Guild is defined as a group of players who share a common principal or outlook, or a specialized group of players (Griffiths et al, 2003). The second part of the question looks at a loose social group, defined as play with temporary 5-man groups of individuals who are not part of your guild. Finally, the third part deals with non-verbal communication with players either in or outside of a guild. Non-verbal communication is defined as being the role and class you choose in game. Of the 94 qualifying surveys, 83 (88%) of the participants were male, 10 (11%) were female, and 2 (2%) were transgendered male to female. The case of gender and gender swapping originally explored by Griffiths et. al. (2003) where explored by analyzing survey results on two significant Ever Quest fan sights it was found that 14% of the male population gender-swapped and 1% of the female population did as well, these percentages seem small but these were taken from a sample-size of 11,457 people. The same goes for the empirical study performed by the same researchers in 2004. These findings were remarkably similar to the Cole (2007) study on social interactions in MMORPGs, hers being 29% female, and 70% male; the difference being that in Cole's study the older players were mostly Female, whereas in this survey the female population is among the youngest.

It has been shown that above age 27 players tend show different play styles and habits including their likelihood for addition to MMORPGs, than those below age 27 (Smahel et al, 2008). In this study (n=94), 81% (x=76) of the people who took the survey were in the age group 18-29, with

13% ($x=10$) of that being female (and also accounting for all of the female players in the population), 83% ($x=83$) being male, and 3% ($x=2$) being transgendered male to female which also accounted for the entirety of the transgendered population. Smaller numbers represented other age groups, 9% ($x=8$) of the total populations were in their 30s, and likewise another 9% ($x=8$) were in their 40s, with a small 3% ($x=3$) representing people in their 50s, no one older than that participated. The ages in this study dropped dramatically after the 18-29 age bracket. What's surprising about this, is that despite the majority of people who completed the short-answer questions on the survey (51% $x=50$) reporting very casual reasons for gender-swapping the results were still skewed to one side; were as logically the ages should have been more even across the board given the casual reasons for play. This skew could however just simply be due to a larger majority of young players and the small population created by the survey. This could also be saying that older players simply just don't gender-swap as frequently as younger players do on par with the findings in the study by Smahel et al (2008) that older players develop different play habits than younger players.

The countries of the participants were also recorded to ensure that some kind of diversity existed beyond the US market, considering this game extends worldwide. 20 countries were recorded during the survey, the most represented where the United States, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Canada, Denmark and the Netherlands. Other countries, including Australia, Norway, and Poland, had two or less people that participated. The sexes were distributed nicely among the different countries; even considering the small sample size, 30% ($x=4$) of the female population existed in places other than the US and 65% ($x=53$) of males were from countries other than the US providing a number of views from the lens of many different nations. As a way of comparison, in the study by Griffiths et al (2004) a staggering 77% of the population was from North America, 20% were from Europe. In this study the American (north and south) continent made up 46% of the population were as Europe made up the majority with 52% of the population. A question was aroused by the collection of the countries of players after the fact: how significant is this information? Although many countries were represented very few players gave different answers. For example the final question on the survey dealt with guild relationships, and almost every single player said that guild relationships were not affected by gender-swapping. Taken into perspective this means that 48 individuals from twenty different countries almost unanimously agreed on one single thing which considering that male and female roles do differ from culture to culture the fact a male or female would want to represent themselves as one of the other might cause some kind of stir in a crowd of their peers, but this was not the case. The answer to this question might be that the culture in-game may be strong enough to unify many different cultures to one particular set of norms.

Non-verbal communication was taken into account and defined as the class and role that players assumed for their characters in game. It has been shown that females as a majority assume the role of healing whereas males choose ranged damage-per-second (ranged DPS) classes (Companion, Sambrook, 2008). In this survey class and role were recorded for the purpose of seeing if players choose the roles most typical of their real gender (e.g. females playing male healers) or roles based on their assumed gender (e.g. males playing female healers). Of the 94 players who took the survey, all participants were asked which of the 10 classes they play as (e.g. Hunter, Priest, Warrior) and what of five different roles they assumed in game in either player-versus-environment (PVE, e.g. 5-man dungeons and/or 10/25-man raids) or player-versus-player (PVP, e.g. 10-40-man battlegrounds). The choices were Healer, the character which keeps the group alive; DPS, characters that damage targets; and tanks, characters whose job it is to keep the enemy's attention and take the majority of the damage. The distinction between ranged and melee DPS was determined by class choice but because some classes are hybrid classes which can do both melee and ranged DPS, and the fact the choice between

the two were not placed on the survey as a physical option it left a small portion of the population with an undeterminable in-group role.

Although class choice did not seem to show any distinct pattern, class role showed the opposite pattern shown in the Companion, Sambrook study (2008). In the survey for this study, ranged DPS was top of the list with 60% (x=6) of the female population (n=10) assuming that role followed by 30% (x=3) healers and 10% (x=1) melee DPS. The males showed the opposite, with the top role being healers representing 33% (x=27) of the population (n=82), ranged DPS at 30% (x=25), melee DPS was represented by 23% (x=19), tanks a small 10% (x=8) of the population and of the males 5% (x=4) had an undeterminable DPS role. The transgender population had one undeterminable DPS role and one tank. What this shows is that when assuming the role of the opposite gender, even if the player is not “role-playing” (RP) they still, subconsciously or not tend toward the class roles of their assumed gender. In the discussion questions answered by players a lot of the reasons that the opposite gender is chosen is due to a perception that that particular gender “fits” the class, or that that role is most suited for their assumed gender rather than their true gender. This again suggests that players may be assuming the roles of the opposite gender in order to experience the other side of the fence in a way that may be embarrassing for them if they assumed their real gender. An interviewee touched on this when recounting her table-top role-playing that sometimes she would play as a male in order to spark creativity by “distancing” her character from herself. She also speculated that there might be some embarrassment (as suggested above) involved with male players who gender-swap due to potential challenge to their manhood which she feels does not exist as a problem for female players. Although she discussed mostly table-top roleplaying, she talked about being in groups that can be a “safe-space” where she felt men could role-play as the opposite gender and experiment with that lifestyle which guilds in the gaming environment may be providing, especially role-playing guilds. One of the participants in the survey even connected his gender-swapping with an interest in transgenderism in a way that could be described as a reflection of, but not directly related to a sexual fetish.

What should be considered however is that the great majority of the players (48% x=23 n=48) said in one way or the other that they did not hide their real gender, the furthest most would go is simply not correcting people in casual environments not involving guild members. This could defeat the idea that certain group roles are embarrassing (or just gender-swapping in general) because players do not hide their gender often and none reported to hide to gender due to their class or group role choice.

The second part of this study had to do with casual play. World of Warcraft affords opportunities to play with people within a guild, who may or may not be close to the player, or with random players from other servers, most of whom will never see the people in their group any more than that one time. Bluntly, it was asked whether gender-swapping had any effect on the groups players would find themselves in. Of the responses given, there were 23 instances of players saying that their gender-swapping had no effect on their casual groups. A lot of these responses paralleled those players who also represented themselves as their real gender in game. Of the players asked, 6 people reported that they only tell others their gender if asked, instead playing their assumed gender roles by practicing passivity. One player reported in the survey and her interview that her gender-swapping kept things focused on the game instead of her being female which she says can lead to distractions, though she will disclose if asked. Also there were 5 instances of players saying they represented their real gender only to those people they knew and others who simply remained neutral and genderless, not identifying as either male or female but simply a player within the game.

From here players become more subject to hide their identities but these players are the minority. Only 6 people play as their assumed gender, the majority of these people are role-players however, and this is to be expected on role-playing servers where you are to be in character when interacting with people in the game world. Two people said that they did not tell people they were female at all, not even to their guild. There were also several responses that were only recognized once or twice, such as acting as their assumed gender just to mess with other players or that they use their real gender because they found that assuming their characters gender took too much work and could result in the loss of friends. No more than one person shared this type of experience.

It seems however that the information in the survey could be lip-service in favor of the research. It was discovered in the interviews that players can be a little less open about their gender depending on circumstances; this was after some probing beyond the “do you represent yourself as your real or assumed gender” question. Both of the female interviewees reported that in online environments they do feel like they are treated different and in one case will only disclose if asked in the other she may just play the role of the male to avoid conflict (by maintaining the comfort of herself or the other).

The third interaction in part of the whole question is social interactions between players and their guilds. The question asked by Hussain and Griffiths (2008) was “what happens in a guild when players reveal themselves not to be who they first said they were?” A simplified version of this question was asked in relation to the larger question of interactions in game, simply: how does gender-swapping affect your interactions with your guild and if you don’t have a guild does gender-swapping have anything to do with it? This part of the survey was the most surprising due to its nearly unanimous answer. Almost every single player said that gender-swapping had no effect on their relationships in guild. If they didn’t have a guild, gender-swapping had nothing to do with it, and nearly everyone represented themselves as their real gender. One player from the survey said that the worse they ran into while playing the role of a female in guild instead of their true gender where the sexist insults he would endure if he were to speak out harshly. One player who did not disclose her real gender to her guild didn’t report any problems with her guild due to her secret. What is interesting was an account of another player who reveals his real gender but at one time used his assumed gender (in another game). He stated that managing relationships within the guild took too much work; he could not maintain friendships because to do so would involve interactions outside of the game and that would give him away as a male. Although this was only one account, a focus on these types of situations might lead to some interesting results. In an attempt to get some kind of answer to the Hussain, and Griffiths (2008) question it was presented directly to the interviewees. For all three of them, they said they would not care. One stating that she feels that if someone was to come-out as the opposite gender to her and the rest of the guild its ok because everyone is entitled to their own opinion. Another stated that she would simply think “they were lying to me then and could be lying now” but she still would not care. In both the survey and two of the interviews it was said that in guilds avatars mean nothing. This would make sense because once you are part of a guild it seems, from the answers given, that the third-wall is broken and you are no longer your avatar, but the guild sees you for you and not the character on the screen. Last, one interviewee states that when confronted with a guild-mate admitting to being the other gender he would feel “indifferent,” he feels that “each individual would approach playing their [character] differently and that it doesn’t affect [him] in any which way or form.... to each is own!”[sic].

Last, the big question, and the biggest part of the whole research question is why? Why do people do it? They report in mass that the reason to gender-swap is purely aesthetic. Gender-swapping

happens because the female or male characters simply look better, or their cast animations are better (casting animations were one very specific thing that people mentioned). The fact that so little people reported any social reason for it was surprising. Other reasons for gender-swapping has been discussed, they include sex-roles (deciding that that class “fits” a certain gender more than the other), sexual attraction (more than one player stated bluntly “I like girl’s butts,” others less bluntly explained that, because the game environment is shown from the back of your character, if they have to stare at someone’s back-side for hours, days, months on end they would prefer it to be a back-side they enjoy). There was also the aforementioned role-playing which takes the role of gender and inserts it to a story setting where interactions are not representative of someone’s real attributes at all, at least not outwardly. Some players did mention that females were treated different, either better in the form of other players being more polite or worse in the form of unwanted advances. One of the interviewees stated that even though his female character was just for fun and he made no attempt to portray himself as male or female, he did notice special treatment (specifically patience in the face of healing for a group) that he said he would not get on his male character.

Gender swapping occurs in game mostly for aesthetic purposes. Groups, either outside of a guild or inside one, don’t tend to discriminate against gender-swapping and social interactions with other players are, beside a few small exceptions, generally unaffected by the practice. The same interviewee who noticed the male/female difference while healing (who was also the most neutral and gender non-specific of them all) stated that his character was nothing more than aesthetics. He simply wanted to create a character that was modeled off of a fictional character and then run around and see who would catch the reference. The previous example aside, taking nearly all the responses to this study as a whole, gender-swapping can be nicely summed up using the word “comfort.” One of the interviewees states comfort as a large reason behind gender-swapping in many environments, table-top role-playing and virtual role-playing. Most of the reasons stated previous to now revolved around comfort levels of some kind, be they comfort with their gender, interactions with others, their eyes when greeted by the backside of their character for hours on end, it seems comfort can be safely assumed as being a leading drive in gender swapping by both male and female players.

Limitations and Future Research

The limitations present in this project are many. The surveys should had been on more forums, this was not the fault of the researcher or any one person just an unfortunate matter of circumstance. If the survey could had been distributed to a few more people the female population may had been bigger and results could had been more representative of the truth (10 is not a statistically sound population size). The surveys themselves could have been redesigned to be a little more effective, from working to combine some questions into one question. One problem with the survey was the overlooked inclusion of a “melee DPS” option when choosing group roll. The style of interviewing was armature at best and could be improved on in the future. Part of the reason the interviewing went wrong was due to time management and perhaps a little too much faith in those who opted into the interviews. Time or rather the management there of, was a huge limit to this project. Not because there was not enough time allowed but because time could had been managed a lot better.

There is a lot of room for future research into gender-swapping. First the researchers could do a more thorough comparison of online gaming to table-top gaming because the two hold a number of parallels and likewise have a lot of unique features just unto themselves. The role reversal in gender-swapping players (i.e. men playing healers when playing females and females playing ranged DPS when playing males) is something that could be explored further by a more focused study. The

Heussein, Griffiths question could also be explored further because it did not seem to be answered to satisfaction within the scope of this study. Last, the fact that transgendered people answered the survey opens an opportunity to explore that aspect of the game environment and also to explore what exactly is a gender-swap when the person has swapped gender in real life. In this study both of the transsexual players were male to female, and of the two one played a male character the other played a female character but both were excepted as qualifying because of the blurred line in the case of those individuals. Although it could be argued that a transgendered male to female takes on the gender of being female (regardless of birth) making the transgendered player who played the male character the truly gender-swapped player, these are questions that can be answered in further research.

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