

WHAT I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT MMOS

DIGITAL GAMES RESEARCH ASSOCIATION

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INTRODUCTION

- SO, I'VE BEEN WORKING WITH VIRTUAL WORLDS FOR OVER **30 YEARS**
- I'VE SEEN RESEARCH IN THE FIELD DEVELOP FROM **NOTHING TO HUNDREDS** OF BOOKS AND **THOUSANDS** OF PAPERS
- I'VE SEEN DIFFERENT FASHIONS **COME AND GO**
- I THOUGHT I'D **SHARE** WITH YOU SOME OF **TODAY'S** FASHIONS THAT I **WANT** TO GO
 - WARNING: **SEVERAL** OF THESE I'VE SEEN AT THIS **VERY** CONFERENCE...

LESSONS OF THE PAST

- THE **FIRST** THING I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT MMOS IS ANYTHING THAT I'VE **ALREADY** HEARD BEFORE
- TWO MAIN REASONS THIS CAN HAPPEN:
 - UTTER **IGNORANCE** OF WORK THAT HAS BEEN DONE BEFORE
 - PASSIONATE **BELIEF** THAT EVERYTHING THAT HAS BEEN DONE BEFORE IS **IRRELEVANT** BECAUSE TODAY'S VIRTUAL WORLDS ARE **DIFFERENT**
- LET'S SEE SOME **EXAMPLES...**

IGNORANCE

- THIS WAS IN *THE GUARDIAN* LAST YEAR:
- “ONLINE GAMERS PLAY AT SWAPPING GENDER”

Online gamers play at swapping gender

Millions of internet users are using computer games to perform virtual sex changes, according to research. A study of online gamers by psychologists at [REDACTED] University found that a majority of them had switched gender while playing. The research, in which 125 players of complex computer games were questioned, found that women were more likely to switch their gender. Up to 70% of female players said they chose to use male identities for internet games, in which they are able to design their own characters with any race, gender or appearance.

Bobbie Johnson

CONSEQUENCES

- NEXT DAY, *THE GUARDIAN* PUBLISHED THIS:
- “SEXUAL HARASSMENT IS RIFE ONLINE. NO WONDER WOMEN SWAP GENDER”
- THIS IMPORTANT RESEARCH RESULT **CLEARLY** MERITED A **PRESS RELEASE...**



Sexual harassment is rife online. No wonder women swap gender

Female gamers are used to putting up with sexist claptrap — both from the companies that design games and other players. So a study by psychologists at

University showing that 70% of them chose to construct male characters when given the option by online games, should come as no surprise.

Anyone who has played video games with any regularity will know that character design is one of those areas where gender stereotypes run riot. Most pre-packaged characters are white, male and buff. Female characters are few and far between, and when they do appear they are usually highly sexualised or passive, or both. Game architects just don't seem to be able to look beyond those pneumatic breasts.

But the study focused on role-playing games where you get to choose everything about your

avatar, including age, shape, ethnicity and gender. Given limitless possibilities, why would women choose to change their sex in far greater numbers than men opting to play women?

As the psychologists suggest, one reason could be the sexism and sexual harassment to which women are subjected online. A cursory glance at the comments under almost any YouTube video featuring a woman demonstrates that just being female is enough to draw a vicious response from a stream of misogynist and anonymous commenters. Technology blogger Kathy Sierra abandoned her website after the harassment directed towards her escalated to unbearable levels. When *Second Life* millionaire Ailin Graef appeared on a chat show in the virtual world to discuss her success on the platform — which is more 3D chatroom than game — her character was swarmed by flying pink penises (the attack was arranged by “griefers” —

users who spend all their time harassing others).

Then you have the “tits or GTFO” internet trend, whereby new posters on message boards who identify themselves as female are requested to post photos of their breasts or “get the fuck off”. When it comes to multiplayer games, such as *World of Warcraft*, women must also face down a whole set of assumptions about their ability to play. Or they could just sidestep all this and construct male characters and avatars.

But let's not forget that, just like TV or film, gaming is a form of escapism. What does it signify if I chose to play a male elf instead of a female elf? We live in a society that rigidly polices our gender expression — in some ways, what is interesting is not that so many gamers chose to play characters of another gender, but the surprised reaction such virtual experimentation produces.

Jess McCabe

PHOTOGRAPH BY SIMON PRESS/REX COVER IMAGE: BRUCE HOFF/COLOMBUS

EXCEPT...

- EXCEPT IT MERITED IT **16 YEARS AGO**
- THE DATA IN THE PAPER MATCHES THAT DONE IN 1993 ON TEXT MUDS
 - EVEN THE **PLAYER QUOTES** ARE EERILY SIMILAR
- ITS ALSO **MISLEADING**
 - WHAT THE RESEARCH **ACTUALLY** FOUND WAS THAT UP TO 70% OF THE 32 FEMALE GAMERS THEY SURVEYED HAD PLAYED AS A MALE CHARACTER IN AN ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING WORLD AT LEAST ONCE
- PLUS, ITS CONCLUSIONS ARE **WRONG**

WHAT WE KNOW

- AT ANY ONE TIME, AROUND **40%** OF **MALE** PLAYERS PLAY **FEMALE** CHARACTERS AND ABOUT **5%** OF **FEMALE** PLAYERS PLAY **MALE** CHARACTERS
- WHEN ASKED **WHY**, BOTH GENDERS HAVE EVOLVED ANSWERS THAT STRENGTHEN THEIR GENDER IDENTITY
 - “I’M **SO MALE...**” AND “I’M **SO FEMALE...**”
- BUT THESE PLAYERS ARE **LYING!**
- WE **KNOW** THEY’RE LYING BECAUSE THOSE FIGURES MATCH THE ONES FOR **TEXT** WORLDS!

IRRELEVANCE

- OTHER RESEARCHERS **NEW** TO VIRTUAL WORLDS **KNOW** THAT THERE IS A BODY OF WORK IN THE AREA BUT THEY **CHOOSE** TO IGNORE IT
- NOW IF YOU'RE LOOKING AT AN AREA THAT IS **INDEED** NEW, THIS IS FINE
 - *EG.* IF THE **SCALE** OF WORLDS OR THE **RENDERING** OF THE GRAPHICS IS IMPORTANT
- HOWEVER, IN OTHER CASES IT'S SIMPLE, **UNINFORMED** ARROGANCE
- HERE'S AN ANALOGY...

FILM

- COMPARE **TODAY'S** MOVIES WITH THOSE OF **100 YEARS AGO**
- THE BASIC **VOCABULARY** IS THE **SAME**
 - CUTS, MONTAGE, MISE-EN-SCENE, ...
- IF YOU'RE SPECIALISING IN COLOUR OR SOUND OR DIALOGUE, **THEN** IT'S DIFFERENT
- IF YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT **FILM**, THOUGH?
- SO IT IS WITH VIRTUAL WORLDS AND **MUDS**
 - MUCH OF WHAT WAS WRITTEN ABOUT *LAMB DAMOO* **REALLY DOES** APPLY TO *SECOND LIFE*

REALITY CHECK

- OLDER WORK CAN ACT AS A **REALITY CHECK**
- EXAMPLE: WHY DO FEWER **WOMEN** PLAY MMOS THAN **MEN**?
- EASY! BECAUSE **HYPERSEXUALISED** IMAGES OF THE FEMALE FORM PUT WOMEN **OFF**
- SO HOW COME THE **PROPORTION** OF FEMALE PLAYERS IS THE SAME AS FOR TEXT MUDS **20 YEARS AGO**?
 - 5% TO 20% FOR A MAINSTREAM GAME
- HAVE YOU **READ** THE FEMINIST LITERATURE FROM BACK THEN THAT **EXPLAINED** IT?

SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE

- THE **SECOND** THING I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT MMOS IS ANYTHING THAT **DISRESPECTS** THE SUBJECT MATTER
- EXAMPLE: USING GAMES TO MAKE YOUR **AI RESEARCH** LOOK COOL BUT TREATING THEM AS IF THEY WERE **NOT WORTHY** OF RESEARCH IN AND OF THEMSELVES
- UNLESS YOU'RE A **DESIGNER** YOU SHOULD AT LEAST **PLAY** MMOS SOME IF YOU WANT TO **WRITE** ABOUT THEM

DISTINCTIONS

- A LACK OF **SUBJECT** KNOWLEDGE OFTEN MANIFESTS AS **OVER-GENERALISATION**
- THERE ARE SOME **IMPORTANT** DISTINCTIONS:
 - WORK ON “VIDEO GAMES” DOES **NOT** AUTOMATICALLY APPLY TO MMOS
 - WORK ON SOCIAL WORLDS DOES **NOT** AUTOMATICALLY APPLY TO GAME WORLDS
 - FACEBOOK IS **NOT** AN MMO. NO, **REALLY**, IT'S **NOT**.
- THE **REVERSE** OF THE ABOVE **ALSO** APPLY

TECHNICAL TERMS

- PLAYERS AND RESEARCHERS HAVE THEIR OWN SPECIALIST **TECHNICAL** TERMS
- SOMETIMES, THESE ARE THE **SAME** TERMS
- SOMETIMES, THEY MEAN **DIFFERENT** THINGS
 - WHEN A PHILOSOPHER SAYS “CONTINGENCY”, THIS IS **NOT** WHAT A GAMER MEANS BY IT
 - WHEN A GAMER SAYS “IMMERSION”, THIS IS **NOT** WHAT A PSYCHOLOGIST MEANS BY IT
- TERMS CAN ALSO **SHIFT** IN MEANING
 - AVATAR, GRIEFING, VIRTUAL WORLD...
- **PLAY** THE GAMES AND **KNOW** THE TERMS

HOME THEORIES

- OH, I **ALSO** DON'T WANT TO HEAR HOW SOME IDEA FROM YOUR **HOME** DISCIPLINE CAN HAVE MMOS **SHOEHORNED** INTO IT
- *EG.* MMOS ARE **NOT** "THIRD PLACES"
 - THEY HAVE THIRD PLACES **WITHIN** THEM
- *EG.* FLOW IS **NOT** THE REASON PEOPLE PLAY MMOS
 - BECAUSE IF YOU WERE IN A STATE OF FLOW FOR **2-4 HOURS** EVERY EVENING FOR **2** YEARS, YOUR **BRAIN** WOULD **SHRIVEL UP AND DIE**

INSIDE KNOWLEDGE

- SOMETIMES, **ESTABLISHED** RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES **DON'T** APPLY TO MMOS
- EXAMPLE: IN LITERARY CRITICISM, RESEARCHERS **ONLY** JUDGE THE **TEXT**
 - THEY STUDIOUSLY **DON'T** SPEAK TO THE AUTHORS
- RESEARCH IS **DELIBERATELY** SEPARATED FROM PRACTICE
 - CALL IT A "MAGIC CIRCLE"...
- SHOULD **MMO** RESEARCHERS AVOID CONTACT WITH A "**PRIVILEGED AUTHOR**" DESIGNER?

No...

- **NO**, THEY SHOULDN'T
- MMO DESIGNERS READ **VORACIOUSLY**
 - THIS OFTEN **INCLUDES** RESEARCH PAPERS!
- SOME **WILL INDEED** GET HOLD OF THE PROCEEDINGS FOR **THIS** CONFERENCE AND READ **YOUR** PAPER
- IT'S POINTLESS **SPECULATING** WHY DESIGNERS DO THINGS – YOU MAY AS WELL JUST **ASK** THEM
 - YOU'RE GOING TO INFLUENCE THEM **ANYWAY**, LIKE IT OR NOT

GOING NATIVE

- THE **THIRD** THING I DON'T WANT TO HEAR IS RESEARCH THAT IS **NO SUCH THING**
- I MENTIONED **EARLIER** THAT SOME PEOPLE DISRESPECT THE **SUBJECT** MATTER
- OTHER PEOPLE RESPECT IT **TOO MUCH** AND DISRESPECT THEIR **ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE**
- CLASSIC CASE: YOU WANT TO **DESIGN** A GAME SO LOOK FOR A **RESEARCH TOPIC** TO **HANG** IT OFF
 - SERIOUS GAMES, YOU HAVE A LOT TO ANSWER FOR

RETRO-FITTED RESEARCH

- EVERY SUMMER IN THE MID-1990S **SWATHES** OF QUESTIONNAIRES APPEARED ABOUT **MUDS**
 - PEOPLE WERE USING THEIR **DISSERTATION** AS AN **EXCUSE** TO LEGITIMISE THEIR PLAY
- EVEN **TODAY** WE SEE ACADEMICS TRYING TO **TRICK** PEOPLE INTO THINKING THEIR OVER-EXTENSIVE PLAY HABIT WAS RESEARCH ALL ALONG
- IT **WASN'T**: GET OVER IT
 - OR IF IT **WAS**, YOUR **ETHICS** COMMITTEE WILL **NAIL** YOUR **HIDE** TO THE **WALL**

"SHOULD"

- WHEN RESEARCHERS GET **OVER-INVESTED** IN THEIR SUBJECT MATTER, THEY CAN INADVERTENTLY **TAKE SIDES**
 - THEY START USING WORDS LIKE "SHOULD"
- **PARTICULARLY** PREVALENT IN ARTICLES ABOUT VIRTUAL WORLDS AND **GOVERNMENT**
 - **ALSO** POPULAR IN WORKS ON MMOS AND **MINORITIES**
- THIS MAKES THEM **IDEOLOGICAL TRACTS**
- PLEASE, USE A **GUARD** TERM
 - **IF** YOU WANT THIS **THEN** YOU "SHOULD" DO THIS

LAZY SCHOLARSHIP

- THE **FOURTH** THING I DON'T WANT TO HEAR ABOUT MMOS CONCERNS **LAZY** SCHOLARSHIP
- EXAMPLE: EXTRAPOLATING FROM SURVEYS OF **20** PEOPLE TO MAKE STATEMENTS ABOUT **20,000,000**
 - OR **32** TO HOWEVER MANY FEMALE MMO PLAYERS THERE ARE, IN THE EARLIER EXAMPLE FROM **██████████** UNIVERSITY
- SOME MMO SURVEYS HAVE **30,000** RESPONDENTS – YOUR 16 **DON'T COMPARE**

MORE TO AVOID

- ANYTHING WITH "FOUCAULT", "BAUDRILLARD" OR "BARTHES" IN THE TITLE

SPUN-OUT RESEARCH

- AS A **GENERAL** POINT...
- IF YOUR RESEARCH HAS N FINDINGS, YOU GET **ONE** PAPER OUT OF IT, NOT N PAPERS
- I'M **TIRED** OF READING PAPERS **PIECEMEAL** LIKE THEY WERE **SOAP OPERAS**
- THEY WEREN'T LIKE THIS **20 YEARS AGO**, WHY ARE THEY LIKE THIS **NOW**?
- YES, **YOU TOO** WILL GET THIS CRANKY WHEN YOU'RE **MY** AGE...

FINALLY

- THE LAST THING I WANT TO **RANT** ABOUT IS THE NOTION THAT ALL RESEARCH IS OF **VALUE**
 - IT'S ALL **POTENTIALLY** OF VALUE, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN IT'S **INTRINSICALLY** VALUABLE
- I HAVE **LOST COUNT** OF ARTICLES THAT SPLIT MMO PLAYERS UP INTO DIFFERENT **TYPES** AS IF THAT WERE AN **END** TO THE MATTER
- WHO IS THE RESEARCH **FOR**? WHO'S GOING TO **USE** IT? **HOW** WILL THEY USE IT? WHAT **BENEFIT** WILL THEY GAIN FROM IT? AUGH!

ANALYSIS

- I'M **HORRIBLY** AWARE THAT SO FAR I CAN APPLY THAT PREVIOUS SLIDE TO **THIS** TALK
- SO, LET'S LOOK AT WHAT'S GOING ON HERE
- THERE ARE BASICALLY **FOUR** KINDS OF THING I DON'T WANT TO HEAR:
 - UNLEARNED **LESSONS** OF THE PAST
 - LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF **MMOS**
 - LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF **RESEARCH** FIELDS
 - POOR **SCHOLARSHIP**
- WHAT **CAUSES** THESE?

CAUSES

- UNLEARNED LESSONS
 - BECAUSE THIS IS A **YOUNG** FIELD, PEOPLE ARE HOPING TO **STAKE CLAIMS**
 - THIS IS **MUCH** EASIER FOR *TERRA INCOGNITA* THAN FOR *TERRA COGNITA*
- SUBJECT MATTER
 - EXPERTS IN NON-GAMES **COLONISING** GAMES
- GOING NATIVE
 - EXPERTS IN GAMES **REINVENTING** THE **WHEEL**
- POOR SCHOLARSHIP
 - **ALL** OF THE ABOVE

TWO DIRECTIONS

- MMO (AND GAMES IN GENERAL) RESEARCH IS BEING APPROACHED FROM **TWO** DIRECTIONS:
 - PEOPLE TRYING TO USE MMOS TO ADVANCE THEIR **OWN** FIELD
 - PEOPLE TRYING TO USE PICK-AND-MIX RESEARCH TO ADVANCE **MMOS**
- THE FORMER USE MMOS AS A **TOUCHSTONE**; THE LATTER WANT **BETTER** MMOS
- THE TWO SIDES HAVE **MET** BUT HAVE YET TO **BOND** BECAUSE THEY DON'T SHARE **MEANING**

WHAT I WANT

- WHAT I **WANT** TO HEAR ABOUT MMOS ARE THEIR **FOUNDATIONS**
 - THE SAME APPLIES TO GAME RESEARCH IN GENERAL
- WE HAVE **NO** FORMAL METHODS FOR DESCRIBING GAMES OR GAMEPLAY
 - WHEN I LOOKED, I COULDN'T EVEN FIND AN OPERATIONAL SEMANTICS FOR THE **RULES** OF *CHESS*, LET ALONE ITS **GAMEPLAY**
- WE'RE LIKE **PHYSICS** WITHOUT **MATHS** OR **PHILOSOPHY** WITHOUT **LANGUAGE**

SUMMARY

- DIGITAL GAMES ARE RESEARCHED FOR **MANY** DIFFERENT REASONS
- HOWEVER, WE'RE CURRENTLY BUILDING OUR STRUCTURES ON **SWAMPLAND**
 - THEY COULD **SINK** AT ANY MOMENT
- THE PROGRESS WE'RE SEEING WILL REMAIN **SHIFTING** AND **EPHEMERAL** UNTIL WE **KNOW** WHY WE'RE SEEING IT
- WHEN WE DO, **THEN** DIGITAL GAME RESEARCH WILL HAVE COME OF AGE