# Identity Performance in Roleplaying Games

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## Abstract

This article argues that roleplaying games have the potential to challenge, encourage, and subsume the privilege of the stereotypical gamer, one who is white, male, and heterosexual. Though roleplaying games as they are currently designed are neither ideal nor perfect, the article contends they embrace feminist programming strategies and offer those who do not want to play a straight male avatar the opportunity to develop and explore identities through characters in ways that other genres do not. Roleplaying games extend the privilege of representation to other gaming demographics, giving players the opportunity to "play who they are" in the digital world, whether they are able to, or even desire to, explore this identity offline. Without the diversity of representation found in roleplaying games, players would be unable to participate in the potentially fruitful criticism of stereotypes and the ability to interact with players and characters different from themselves.

## 1. Introduction

In Spring 2011, Bastal, a BioWare forum member, started the thread "Bioware Neglected Their Main Demographic: The Straight Male Gamer." Bastal complained that *Dragon Age 2*, a BioWare roleplaying game (RPG), provided players with the choice to have their avatar engage in same-sex relationships. Bastal argued that even though there are heterosexual romance options for both male and female avatars, the heterosexual options for men are "exotic" and not to his liking. As his title implies, Bastal believed game designers should better cater to him and other "straight male gamers" because they are the "main demographic" of RPGs like *Dragon Age 2*. To prove "straight male gamers" are the target audience, Bastal undertook his own ethnography and estimated that *Dragon Age*'s LGBT player population is 5% and admitted that

> there are a substantial amount of women who play video games, but they're usually gamers who play games like
> The Sims, rather than games like Dragon Age. That's not to say there isn't a significant number of women who
> play Dragon Age and that BioWare should forego the option of playing as a women [sic] altogether, but there
> should have been much more focus on making sure us [sic] male gamers were happy. (Bastal, 2011)

Bastal's response provides us not only with an example of the type of person many people believe to be the stereotypical gamer – straight, male, probably white (his avatar photo in the forum shows an older, white male character)

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who chooses to play with an avatar that represents the player both physically and sexually – but also one who is protective of the gaming environment and who uses his own identity to defend that environment in forums. While Bastal freely admitted women, members of the LGBT community, and those who engage in interracial relationships game, he also claimed they do not usually play *his* games – the roleplaying game.[1] Bastal's identity performance – straight and male who prefers to "date" women who look like him – used literacy skills specific to the gaming community when he both performed his identity onscreen through his avatar and in writing through his forum post. He used his privilege as a straight, white, male gamer to communicate and created or performed a "relational identity," composed of "the dialects we speak, the degree of formality we adopt in our speech, the deeds we do, the places we go, the emotions we express, and the clothes we wear" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998, p. 127). Bastal performed his identity not only through language – the post itself – but also in the avatar picture associated with his account, what we might call "the clothes he wears." He presented himself *in relation to* and *more important than* other gamers, women and those in the LGBT community, specifically. By including himself in the "main demographic" and by providing evidence to demonstrate he is a representative of that demographic, Bastal tried to prove why designers should pay more attention to his desires. It is this type of multimodal identity performance that calls readers to consider how roleplaying games encourage players to perform and interrogate their identities.

Bastal's comments sparked discussion within the LGBT blogosphere and prompted BioWare designer David Gaider's response in the forums. In his response, Gaider reminded Bastal

> the romances in the game are not for 'the straight male gamer'. They're for everyone. We [BioWare] have a lot of fans, many of whom are neither straight nor male, and they deserve no less attention. …The majority has no inherent 'right' to get more options than anyone else. (as cited in Pearse, 2011a, March 25)

Gaider's response emphasized BioWare's position that games are "for everyone" and acknowledged that all players in the gaming community deserve to have their interests and identities portrayed. In essence, Gaider's response argues that LGBT and female players deserve *equal*, not proportional, representation in games.

It is not surprising that members of the gaming community responded to Bastal. Though the straight male gamer may be the stereotype, he is far from the only gamer. The Entertainment Software Association (ESA) reported in the 2011 *Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry* that 42% of all gamers are women and adult women make up 37% of the gaming population, more than teenage boys (ages 17 or younger) who comprise only 13% of the gaming population (p. 3). ESA (2011) also reported 7.7% of all console games and 20.3% of computer games sold in 2010 were roleplaying games (p. 8). While the statistics do not account for the type of game played when they discuss gender and age distribution, clearly women game. Additionally, while RPGs are not the most popular console genre, the 20% of all computer games sold make roleplaying one of the most popular computer genres.

In addition to this data, in 2006, Jason Rockwood, a student at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, conducted a "gaymer survey," which received over 10,000 responses. Rockwood asked gamers to disclose their sexual orientation, genre preferences, and how they saw themselves reflected in games. Rockwood found that 28% of respondents self-reported as "completely heterosexual," 23.4% as "completely homosexual," and approximately 45% as bisexual. Forty-two percent of survey respondents answered that RPGs were their favorite genre, more than any other genre by nearly 15%. Players also said that they would like to see more gay and lesbian content in RPGs but not necessarily in other genres (Silwinski, 2007, February 26). Both the ESA's 2011 results and Rockwood's survey demonstrate the straight male gamer is not the only person who plays video games, including RPGs. Rather, the gaming world is as diverse as the genres of games available, making it an unwise business practice to cater to any one population when the goal is to sell games. Instead, as Gaider insisted in his response to Bastal, inclusivity is important for game designers wishing to sell their product.

At the heart of Bastal's original comments, Gaider's response, and the "gaymer survey," is the question of privilege and the ways in which technology creates privilege to enact and explore identities and navigate the gameworld and its attendant spheres like message boards and forums. It is this question of privilege and how RPGs challenge, encourage, or subsume what is understood as the stereotypical privilege of the gamer that is the focus of this essay. Drawing

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[1] Bastal's commentary is sexist and homophobic. While this essay addresses the ways in which RPGs afford people the opportunity to combat sexism and homophobia, I will not address Bastal's homophobia and sexism specifically. Given the response to his comments, both on the forums and in the blogosphere, he does not singularly represent the gaming community.

examples from multiplayer and single-player RPGs, this article analyzes the roleplaying game's ability to allow for or encourage identity representations outside of the "straight male gamer." Though RPGs are neither ideal nor perfect, I contend they embrace feminist programming strategies and offer those who do not want to play a straight male avatar the opportunity to develop and explore identities through characters in ways that other genres do not. Roleplaying games extend the privilege of representation to other gaming demographics, giving players the opportunity to "play who they are" in the digital world, whether they are able, or even desire, to explore this identity offline.[2] Without the diversity of representation found in RPGs, players would be unable to participate in the potentially fruitful criticism of stereotypes and the ability to interact with players and characters different from themselves.

### 1.1. Feminist Game Design in Roleplaying Games

The roleplaying game is well suited to exploring self-representation or identity play, encouraging a more diverse gaming population, and interrogating diversity in the offline world. To accomplish these actions, the genre reflects feminist game design strategies to create more inclusive game worlds; these feminist strategies encourage freedom and equality for players and allow for identity play while simultaneously encouraging critical thinking about our assumptions of the offline world. It is important to note that this reflection is not the same as asserting developers *purposefully* use feminist game design strategies, but rather, the genre's characteristics privilege these strategies. In other words, games can be designed with these strategies in mind, or they can reflect the strategies, as do RPGs, suggesting that some genres are more likely candidates for feminist game design than are others. Justine Cassell (1998) proposed five "feminist programming strategies." Feminist games

- "transfer design authority to [the] user,"
- "value subjective and experiential knowledge,"
- "allow use by many different kinds of users in different contexts,"
- "give the user a tool to express her voice and the truth of her existence," and
- "encourage collaboration among users." (Cassell, 1998, pp. 304-305)

If we compare the gameplay of single-player RPGs and massively multiplayer online roleplaying games (MMORPGs) to Cassell's strategies, we notice that many of these attributes are necessary to the genre's success: players design some parts of the game, specifically avatars and often homes, experiential knowledge affects gameplay, and in MMORPGs, especially, users from around the world play simultaneously, talk to one another, and collaborate. Moreover, active participation in game forums and message boards allow gamers to share their experiences in the game in game-related space. In RPGs, people are given some opportunities to play as they choose, and players use the game's language to write their identities through the linguistic, visual, and strategic choices afforded in the game design.

In addition to mirroring many RPGs' characteristics, these strategies conform to a liberal feminist philosophy, one that encourages "egalitarian participation" in "social, political, and economic contexts," and "the opportunity to engage in and be central to conversations or text exchanges" (Selfe, 1990, p. 121). These feminist strategies fit clearly in second-wave feminism that advocates equality between men and women and are not exclusive to women gamers. Amy Baehr (2012) defined the freedom associated with egalitarian liberal feminism as "personal autonomy – living a life of one's own choosing – and political autonomy – being co-author of the conditions under which one lives" (par. 2). Though women are at the heart of liberal feminism, personal and political autonomy belong to all, and everyone, men and women, straight and gay, has the freedom not only to live and create their chosen life.

When considering this application of feminist design strategies to mass-market games, we must mediate financial considerations, practical design and play concerns, and continued gaming stereotypes. In reality, complete player control, or the "transfer [of] design authority to [the] user," within commercial games is impossible, and only players who build and program their own games and share them with select groups of people have complete control (Cassell, 1998, p. 304). For example, gamers who play MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* or the *EverQuest* franchise must see

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[2] It is important to note that this ability to create – and re-create – identity is not relegated to the digital environment. We recreate our identities everyday – in the classroom, in our writings, in our dealings with friends and families. The focus of this essay, however, is not post-modern identity in the physical world, but rather what technology affords us in the digital world.

the same world if they are to collaborate. Even single-player games suffer limits to this type of individualized player control: many gamers do not have the skills to create patches for the games and still others do not have the time. In "Gaming, Literacy, and Identity," Daniel Keller (2007) interviewed a number of twenty- to thirty-year-old gamers who played IF or interactive fiction, a text-based narrative game. Two of Keller's interview subjects, Paul Ardis and Adam Thornton, identified ways in which graphic games do not enable players to have the same control over games as do text-based games like IF. Both Ardis and Thornton noted that graphic-based games are constrained by predetermined stories and graphic-related interfaces that must work across platforms. Moreover, it is easier to describe through written language, the medium of IF, settings and characters than it is to build those elements with code. These limitations make graphic-based games less player-centered than IF (Keller et al., 2007). Both Ardis and Thornton suggested interactivity and control are important to gaming, but because of the practical design limitations, the best RPGs cannot fully embody these ideals.

Not only is it infeasible to allow complete player control over games, but also many RPGs do not necessarily engender a friendly environment to liberal feminism at the outset of the game. For instance, even though players in both the *Fable* and *Dragon Age* series can choose genders and names, their pre-loaded titles "The Hero" and "The Grey Warden" may cause players to assume the characters are men, preventing those who self-identify as women from feeling connected to the gameplay and "in control" of the environment. Additionally, in games where both male and female characters are options, players may find the female avatars to be overly or more sexualized than their male counterparts. These gender assumptions are a result of the stereotype that Bastal carries – that most gamers (and game developers) are men and want to play that way – and that designers perpetuate.

Even though RPGs may reflect some feminist design principles and are inherently more likely to encourage identity play and diverse representations on the screen and in gameplay than are those games that do not allow for identity play, they do not currently fully embody those principles. In an ideal world players would develop their own games, thus, having complete "design authority." One of the benefits to non-computerized *Dungeons & Dragons* games, for instance, is the ability for players to create their own worlds, but even in this game, time constraints and the fantasy genre limit players. Mass-marketed RPGs cannot and do not follow Cassell's suggestions to their idealized limits. We cannot ignore that in-game player harassment and stereotypical representations of race, gender, and sexuality occur and are part of the gameworld and gaming community. These limitations, however, do not mean that RPGs lack any potential for transformative power.

## 1.2. Avatar Construction

In many ways, it is not surprising that Rockwood's (Silwinski, 2007, February 26) survey reported that players want to see themselves reflected in RPGs but not necessarily in other genres. Of all genres, RPGs not only allow gamers to manipulate the game, but they also intend for players to reflect themselves or create new identities. Gee (2003) explained three video game identities exist: virtual, real, and projective, in which the virtual identity is the character on the screen, the real identity is the physical embodiment of the player behind the game controls, and the projective identity is how the real and virtual interact. In RPGs, these identities may overlap or be entirely different from one another. Players are, by definition, *roleplaying*, and avatars may represent different genders, races, sexual orientations, or even species; players may play as they see themselves, as they believe others in the offline world see them, or as someone, or something, entirely different. This avatar creation and manipulation follows, though not entirely embraces, three of Cassell's (1998) strategies: "transfer design authority to [the] user," "value subjective and experiential knowledge," and "allow use by many different kinds of users in different contexts" (pp. 304-305). This process can provide players with control and a sense of freedom.

To enhance this sense of player-based control, developers encourage, and sometimes require, players to manipulate their identities. Camille Utterback (2004) explored these issues of control, embodiment, and virtual spaces in "Unusual Positions – Embodied Interaction with Symbolic Spaces," in which she distinguished between "poetic" and "practical" control in video art installations. In Utterback's installations, viewer-participants used their bodies to manipulate digital worlds, and Utterback called this embodied control "poetic," contrasting it with the "practical" control of user interfaces that require actions such as pointing and clicking icons on a screen. For Utterback, this poetic embodied experience is more engaging and meaningful than the practical experience. In his response to Utterback, Matt Gorbet (2004) questioned the differences between poetic and practical and suggested that what Utterback perceives as "success" is related to "the sense of control afforded by simple and physically familiar interactions" in addition to the

larger full-body movements (p. 218). These distinctions also apply to video games, where practical control is likened to interacting with a computer or television screen through game controls, as one does in many games including RPGs, and poetic control, or using one's body to interact with the game, as one does with a Nintendo Wii or Xbox Kinect. RPGs seem to straddle this poetic/practical distinction, however. While gamers make choices through practical interfaces by pushing buttons on a controller, pointing and clicking with a mouse, or using key commands, as they create their avatar during the opening moments of the game and subsequently move through the world *in the body* of the avatar, they manipulate the game world through and with this embodiment. This is particularly true for those players who choose to move around the world in first-person camera view as opposed to third-person. Those in first-person view see the world through the avatar's eyes. The control over avatar creation and design provides gamers with opportunities to experience their avatars "as legible signs," which "take on their own behaviors and responses" (Utterback, 2004, p. 219) within the gameworld and to which other characters, both human and computer-generated, react.

RPGs offer players a wide variety of characteristics from which to choose for their "legible" avatars. Options include changing not only the avatar's clothes but also more critical choices that align with identity: gender, skin tone, hair color and style, facial features, height, weight, and more recently, sexual orientation. We learned from Bastal's comments that The Grey Warden, the main character-avatar in *Dragon Age II* can choose to be male or female, straight, gay, or bisexual. Similarly, the Hero of Oakvale in the *Fable* series can also be male or female and can woo both men and women. As noted above, even within these two examples where players have the opportunity to choose the sex, gender performance, and sexual orientation of the avatars, titles like "The Hero" and "The Grey Warden" may present as masculine to many, and it is up to the player to change that perception.

In MMORPGs players generally have more choices. For example, players begin the game by choosing a race (gnome, human, elf, and dwarf are often among the choices available), gender, and class (such as warrior, healer, mage, or scout). Players also often choose clothing, accessories, hair, and skin tone. Note here that "race" does not mean the same thing as we conceive it in the offline world, but rather it means a different species, leaving the player to determine the specific physical appearance of their character outside of (or within) the confines of race or ethnicity.[3] Alongside the possibly stereotypical portrayals of race by designers, players too, may create overtly racialized or even racist identities in the gameworld because the words, images, and actions gamers use to create an identity can be, and are, racialized (Nakamura, 2002, p. 31). So, too, do performances of gender come out through identities, language, and graphic images, like Bastal's older, white avatar image in the BioWare Forums. In addition to these physical aspects, players choose their abilities and actions – their jobs, if you will, through their class, which further allows players to identify with or create separate identities for their avatars. The magical abilities avatars have in the game are, of course, not particularly lifelike, but people who are interested in pyrotechnics may find themselves interested in playing a mage who casts spells that create fireballs. A person interested in medicine may choose to become a healer. Gender, physical appearance, and sexuality can all be played out alongside interests, creating a more rounded character experience.

Important to liberal feminism is the fact that the player's ability to shape one's identity through appearance and gender does not directly hinder characters' abilities in the game world. Though race and class change characters' powers, gender does not; for example, in *EverQuest II*, a male dwarf mage and a female dwarf mage have exactly the same skills at the beginning at the beginning of the game. A male dwarf mage and a male human mage, however, will not. These differences do not make a dwarf or human better than the other: they simply make them different. Similarly, gender does not affect avatar skills in single-player games like *Fable* and *Dragon Age*. Any changes in the avatar's powers are a direct result of the player's strategic choices and not a result of gender or sexuality. In other words, players craft their characters' strengths and weaknesses within the system, through choices, giving the players some sense of "design authority" over the avatars that represent them and building into the game the importance of subjective experiences.

Even though changing the appearance, gender, and class of an avatar may not be the ideal end to "design authority," the ability to create an avatar that represents the player is important, whether that representation is true to the player's physical or envisioned body. Though we should ask why designers create races the way that they do, the equality

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[3] This discussion of race is complicated by a number of studies on race and stereotype, particularly in *World of Warcraft*, with some discussions making it into mainstream media outlets like NPR's "Our Conversation on Race in *World of Warcraft*, Unabridged" (Demby, 2014, March 14). See also Nakamura (2009) "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*" and Jessica Langer (2008) "The Familiar and the Foreign: Playing (Post)Colonialism in *World of Warcraft*."

between the male and female versions of races, and the ability for players to manipulate avatars helps solidify a liberal feminism that aspires to have everyone speak and be heard equally. While the users cannot dictate what other in-game characters look like or what the quests or in-game assignments are, gamers do determine, within the confines of game rules, what their characters look like, how they act, and how they are represented. They can, if they wish, begin to design themselves in the game world. Only in games that offer players the ability to customize avatars, and most often these games are roleplaying games, does this possibility of design authority become available to players.

### 1.3. *Embodying the Avatar Or "Expressing Truth of One's Existence"*

Players' design choices for avatars create complicated relationships between the onscreen and offscreen identities. In *Life on the Screen* Sherry Turkle (1995) examined playing as both a male and neuter character in a MUD. When she learned to navigate the MUD, she did not assign herself a gender. She wrote of this experience:

> Gender was the last thing on my mind. This rapidly changed when a male-presenting character named Jiffy asked me if I was 'really an it.' At his question, I experienced an unpleasurable sense of disorientation which immediately gave way to an unfamiliar sense of freedom. (Turkle, 1995, p. 210)

Though Turkle experienced freedom, the longer she participated in the MUD, the more she realized that there was a "preoccupation" with determining players' offline genders because "we use gender to shape our relationships" (Turkle, 1995, p. 211). This same experimentation and the attending preoccupations are certainly present in RPGs. Unlike in MUDs and other text-based digital worlds like the interactive fiction (IF) discussed above, graphics-based games often prevent characters from presenting as neuter. The social construction of gender and assumptions about clothing and appearance may lead designers and players to believe that people are either male or female. Just as questions of racial stereotypes complicate discussions of identity in *World of Warcraft*, our binary assumptions of gender complicate the ability for players to assume a range of gendered characters.

Performances like the ones that Turkle undertook, however, are equally complicated and not without consequences even when playing a specific gender, especially in online games where human players interact with one another rather than with non-player characters (NPCs). Just as programmers' preconceptions of binary gender can limit the choices players have, gamers' preconceptions of gender also limit performances. Even though roleplaying games allow players to engender and perform in ways they choose, the game creators, other players, and even players themselves may feel confused or conflicted in the process of "giv[ing] the user a tool to express her voice and the truth of her existence" (Cassell, 1998, 305). Turkle (1995) calls this experimentation with gender "virtual cross-dressing" or "virtual gender-swapping," noting that "it can be psychologically complicated. Taking a virtual role may involve you in ongoing relationships. In this process, you may discover things about yourself that you never knew before. You may discover things about other people's response to you" (p. 213). While Turkle speaks directly to experimenting with one's presentation in the online world, but not necessarily in the gameworld, experimentation and interaction can have negative consequences, as well. Simply the act of playing with strangers can have a negative affect, one in which the strangers challenge not only gender performance, as happened to Turkle when someone asked if she "was 'really an it,'" but performance in the game itself as it relates to completing quests or tasks may also be challenged by other players.

Mullis (2014, April 13) suggested that interaction in the game can be "fun" and that video games are inherently social, yet the possibility of negative attention, or trolling, reminds players and observers alike that the offline and online worlds are not separate. Though Mullis (2014, April 13) contended that gameplay is and should be fun, he too argued that gender encourages online harassment. He explains that players can "Consider using gender-neutral gamer names," admitting, as a gamer himself,

> It's actually embarrassing to have to suggest this, but the truth is there is a vocal minority in the gaming community that targets female gamers for an extra level of harassment. I support taking a stand against this knuckle-dragging nonsense and not being forced into hiding, but if you would rather not be bothered, the easiest thing to do is create gamer tags and character names that don't specify gender. (par. 18)

Though having the opportunity to choose one's gender and performance in the gameworld is certainly an appealing proposition, the opportunity to experiment is not without both its positive and negative consequences, leaving some players, as Mullis suggests, in hiding. Whether players "hide," in Mullis's (2014, April 13) words, or whether they live

with the consequences of performing their, or a, gender online, players face the possibility that, in this space which does privilege experience and subjective knowledge, other players hinder their rights to freedom and choice, especially in MMORPGs but also in single-player games with little latitude created by game designers. Though RPGs allow for and enable some of the feminist philosophies attendant in Cassell's (1998) strategies above, these limitations exist.

This attention to the avatar's body, by both the player herself and those that she may interact with in the game, is also important to the player's connection to the gameworld. Though a small part of the actual game design is the avatar, it is an authoritative space for player interactions. In "Virtual Bodies, or Cyborgs Are People Too" Jonathan Boulter (2005) explained the relationship between player and avatar: "The body in the video game is the site of expressions of anxiety, power, and desire precisely to the extent that the game offers potentially unlimited possibilities for the body's modification and extension" (p. 52). For Boulter, the avatar can take on the personality and anxieties of the player *if* and *when* the player can "modify" that avatar. The more modifications available, the more the avatar itself can reflect the player as she wants to be seen. This ability for the avatar to take on or express "anxiety, power, and desire" is an important part of the liberal feminist philosophies that ground Cassell's (1998) strategies because the player "co-authors" (Baehr, 2012) the lived reality of the avatar through the design decisions required to create the avatar and play the game.

Avatars' bodies also reflect desire and power that may not be available in the physical world but are possible in the gameworld. For instance, people of color, women, and those with disabilities may feel that the offline world is not entirely available to them. Through gameworld modifications, their desires may be played without the restrictions of racism, sexism, or accessibility.[4] To leave the physical world and control the gameworld is also a necessary part of RPGs. For Boulter (2005), this temporality means that the game and physical worlds do not interact because

> It cannot be argued that the game experience alters or interrogates the real world; it cannot be argued that the game even presents a particularly nuanced ability to transcend the real self. What is crucial about the cyborg-as-gamer/gamer-as-cyborg trope is *precisely* its temporally and ideologically limited structure: its limitations are precisely central to its seductive, almost sublime appeal. (p. 57)

Boulter argued that because the offline and online words do not interact – and that the "game experience" does not affect the "real world" – players are more drawn to the gameworld.

Boulter's conclusions that video games do not affect the offline world are too simple, however. While explosions in the game do not, in fact, alter the mechanical stability of the physical world, the ability to create an avatar to one's liking, can "interrogate the real world" and "alter" it. Independent roleplaying games like *Space Funeral* (2010) challenge not only the genre but "By confronting their players with videogaming's underlying artifice, these games knowingly remove their potential to convey a traditional narrative. . . .By sinking into abstract excess, these games simultaneously offer a compelling argument for and against videogaming's methods of representation" (Close, 2014, April 21). Newer roleplaying games subvert the traditional stereotypes, and changes in representation, identity, and the ability to interact with others who portray a different identity, especially in MMORPGs where players interact with other players, allow gamers to develop what Alexander (2009) calls "multicultural" and "critical literacies." According to Alexander (2009), players create "multicultural literacies" because they play with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. These different backgrounds allow "players [to] develop norms of communication that [respect] cultural and identity differences such as sexuality." As players explore the game world, their critical understanding of these different values increases, and they begin to "communicate successfully and mutually interrogate assumptions [that] may exacerbate preexisting biases or hostilities" (Alexander, 2009, p. 45) such as racism, sexism, or homophobia. When players design their avatars and interact with both real human beings and in-game figures, they develop necessary literacies that not only allow them to explore their own identities but also interact with the offline world. Roleplaying within the game world both encourages people to listen to others, particularly those who are in social and cultural minorities and who offer different ideas, values, and understandings of the world around them (Alexander, 1997, p. 212). To embody an avatar on the screen encourages players to question their offline experiences and to treat people offline differently (and, hopefully, with more compassion and equality). If liberal feminism encourages "personal autonomy"

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[4] Numerous discussions about the inclusion of women, people of color, and gaming abound. While the question of access to gaming and the treatment of women in games is still important, I argue that women who play RPGs have more options because of the format of the game. For more discussions of gender and video games see Carr, Cassell, Kafai, Graner Ray, Taylor, and Sherman.

(Baehr, 2012) and the opportunity to engage with "social, political, and economic" contexts (Selfe, 1990 p. 120), then interrogating the offline world through the online one provides players not only the ability to practice "personal autonomy" but also engage in potentially divisive contexts in relative safety. Moreover, players' lived experiences in the game may also change their actions outside the game and further enhance others' performances.

This power to design, control, and embody the avatar to interrogate the offline world not only helps players understand the offline world better, but it also entails the power to represent oneself in the non-game world, an ability players, especially women, may feel incapable of wielding without practice. For instance, Valerie Walkerdine (2006) in "Playing the Game: Young Girls Performing Femininity in Video Game Play" explained women might practice identities and benefit from this practice because "contemporary femininity demands practices and performances which bring together heroics, rationality, etc. with the need to maintain a femininity which displays care, co-operation, concern, and sensitivity to others" (p. 520). Undoubtedly, some feminists may argue against this need to "maintain femininity," yet roleplaying games also provide the opportunity to practice and perform heroics and rationality as players solve problems. For example, The Hero's job in *Fable II* is to rescue his or her sister and defeat the men who took her. That task requires problem solving, rationality, and heroism. At the same time, The Hero can choose to dress nicely, keep house, and help others, all tasks that show a woman maintaining femininity while defeating enemies through physical strength and skill. These "feminine" skills, however, are not required of The Hero, and if a woman chooses not to practice those skills, her avatar's life is not negatively impacted. If women can act rationally and logically in the gameworld – and practice those skills – they may feel more comfortable doing so in the physical world, combatting the stereotypes that show women as neither rational nor logical. If women succeed in their embodied avatars inside the game world, they may feel more comfortable expressing their existence outside the gameworld.

### 1.4. Avatar Construction and Subjective Experiences

Representing one's self on screen as a "real" identity is not the only way that a player can perform, nor does the online environment require that a person represent *one* identity online. Nakamura (2002) reminded us that "avatars, or renditions of self, provide a pipeline into the phantasmatic world of identities, those conscious and not-so-conscious racial desires and narratives that users construct and inhabit during their interactions in cyberspace" (p. 32). Players may choose to play as themselves, however they choose to define that term, or as someone entirely different. More likely, avatars present a space somewhere on a continuum. While Nakamura (2002) speaks directly to race, gender, also a social construct, plays into the "phantasmatic world of identities." One of Turkle's (1995) interview subjects explained that online identity is a "'pastiche of personalities' in which 'the test of competence is not so much the integrity of the whole but the apparent correct representation appearing at the right time, in the right context, not to the detriment of the rest of the internal 'collective'" (p. 256). Whether we want to explore our identity or not, we are performing for those with whom we play, and these actions often result in a collection of identities in a number of spaces.

Despite this "pastiche," exploring differing identities or performing in a way that may cause ostracism in the offline world can be intimidating. Players performing as women, bisexual, or homosexual may find themselves threatened. Roleplaying games, though, can mitigate that intimidation through the safety of pseudonymity. Alexander (1997) suggested that the pseudonymity of online chat rooms can help participants feel more comfortable. Though Alexander (1997) analyzed the possibility of using chat rooms in composition classes, pseudonymity is the same in MMORPGs where players' screen names do not have to disclose information about the user. In addition to possibly protecting players from harassment, pseudonymous gameplay can also enhance friendships and move players past identity markers. In her study of Cybercity, a virtual community, Denise Carter (2005) discovered that players who had "lived" in the city for more than nine months found their online friendships were generally not based on "external social conditions like gender, race or age" and "that this escape from any physical anchors or contact [was] the route to more in-depth friendships" (p. 157). Under pseudonyms, whether in Cybercity or in a gamespace, players construct identities; because pseudonyms hide identity and interactions occur through language that is often written rather than spoken, words define how others understand the player, not offline appearance or prior knowledge. It is in playing, creating, and writing these new identities that players learn more about themselves and the ways that they can change not only their online personae, but also their offline attitudes. Players still "express their voices" and give "truth of their existence," but they may not feel as threatened as they do in the offline world if they were to perform their identities in the same ways. No one but the player knows *exactly* who is behind the avatar, and players are not required to divulge whether they roleplay.

Design control, in this case, control of one's identity lies with the player. Thus, whether through more localized identity exploration in single-player roleplaying games or interactive methods in multi-player games, the ability to control the avatar's actions provides freedom, proof of existence, and the opportunity to participate in social contexts necessary to the liberal feminist constructs.

The ability to connect with the avatar on screen and the role that the avatar plays in determining inclusivity come from two types of identity or, in Cassell's terms, two ways to exist in the game. In "Character Identification in *World of Warcraft*: The Relationship Between Capacity and Appearance," Ragnhild Tronstad (2008) explained "empathy identity" and "sameness identity," claiming that players in *World of Warcraft* connect with their avatars in one of these two ways. Tronstad (2008) argued empathic identity occurs when players and avatars are not "the same." In other words, players do not experience the game through characters' eyes but rather understand what the avatars experience. "Sameness identity" occurs when players experience the gameworld as the avatars – they become one and the same. This identity happens when players roleplay. "Sameness identity" is a matter of feeling avatars' emotions while empathy is a matter of understanding avatars' perspectives (Tronstad, 2008, p. 251). In some ways, these identities are similar to Gee's (2003) real, virtual, and projective identities, where the projective identity equates to Tronstad's sameness identity. Tronstad, however, offers us a more sophisticated way to understand how players react to and understand their avatars because of the emotional attachment or relationship between player and avatar in Tronstad's pairing.

Avatar-identities may be important to how players see themselves in the physical and gameworlds. In roleplaying games, players are allowed to "value subjective and experiential knowledge" (Cassell, 1998, p. 304) because their experiences cause changes in the game, their own avatars, and possibly other characters. Gamers often embody characters that do not represent their offline bodies or identities, but are still "part" of them. For instance, Serena, another one of Turkle's (1995) interview subjects, describes her character creation process, explaining that "I am always very self-conscious when I create a new character. Usually, I end up creating someone I wouldn't want my parents to know about. It takes me, like three hours. But that someone is part of me" (p. 260). This hidden part of Serena and the ability to embody that identity affects her outside of the gameworld. In some roleplaying games the player's actions impact the physical and psychological appearance of the avatar in the game world. For example, in *Fable II* the Hero's appearance and that of his or her dog changes as the character acts. As the player commits illegal or cruel actions like stealing, kicking animals, or assaulting innocent people, the avatar's on-screen appearance becomes grizzled as does that of the dog. As the player performs good deeds, the avatar and the dog look innocent and friendly. The avatar's appearance directly reflects the identity of the Hero, and it reflects choices the player makes. The game contains physical representations of good and evil that alert players to what side they choose. The player's actions also affect how non-player characters respond to the Hero. If the avatar has attained a positive status in a community, the game's characters will interact with the avatar in positive ways. If the avatar has obtained a negative status because of violence, non-player characters respond by shunning the avatar, refusing to do business, or summoning police. The experiences of the avatar, and thus of the player behind the screen, affect game play. In *Fable II*, players can experiment with consequences in ways that they may not desire to in the offline world, and because it is a single-player game, no one but the player has to know how the player chooses to identify in the game world.

Player subjectivity affects not just characters' appearances, alliances, and tasks but also determines how the game is played. Unlike in first-person shooter and strategy games where there is generally an "end" to the game (everyone is dead, you have taken over the world, or you rescued Princess Peach), roleplaying games do not necessarily have an "end." In *Fable II*, the Hero may rescue his or her sister, but the game does not have to "end" with the rescue because the player can return to town and continue interacting with people and completing quests. The player's subjective experiences continue to inform the game world, allowing her to remain in control of how the avatar is understood.

One reason roleplaying games are well suited to value subjective experience, prove one's existence, and maintain control is because RPGs tell stories. In a study with elementary-aged children, Yasmin Kafai (1998) determined that girls did not like games any less than boys; rather, girls preferred different types of games like puzzles and those that told stories. This study hypothesized that inclusive games would include interactive, multi-user formats because both women and men had the desire to communicate and play with others.[5] Kafai (1998) asserted that if games were

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[5] Tanner Higgin (2014, April 18) reports that more and more video games are encouraging play and collaboration, even outside of the RPG genre. In "Inventive Games that Teach Kids about Empathy and Social Skills" Higgin highlights four games, *The Social Express*, *Thomas Was Alone*, *Way*, and *Social Adventures* that are designed to help players, in this case mostly children "to reflect on themselves and their relationships." Both *Thomas*

designed with this multi-user format, it would be easier to attract both men and women to the same game. Similarly, as Keller's (2007) interview subjects suggested, an expansive story in interactive fiction (IF) was one way to intrigue and involve players – the story and the ability to participate in that story were integral to player enjoyment. MMORPGs use the multi-user formats that Kafai recommends, and in single-player roleplaying games, avatars interact with characters inside the game world, talking to them to gather information, asking questions, and buying and selling goods. All roleplaying games depend on a grand narrative, smaller side narratives, and other characters to stimulate play, and it is within this story that Cassell's strategies thrive because players' decisions can affect the outcome of the story, and determine how the story is told, the plot is revealed, and problems are solved.

## 2. Conclusion

This essay begins with a discussion of Bastal's (2011) comments concerning what he believed was the game industry's lackadaisical approach to design for the "main demographic." In an interview held shortly after the discussion began video game designer and executive Ernest Adams and blogger Krissie Pearse (2011b, April 8) considered the gaming population:

> Krissie Pearse: The gaming industry seems to have taken a few steps forward in recent times, but responses to the BioWare story seem to indicate that the demographics of gamers have diversified faster than the industry itself has. There's a charge that the industry caters especially to a heterosexual male demographic when in fact it doesn't really need to do much to be more inclusive of many other demographics as well. Do you feel that the industry needs to diversify in such a way?
> Ernest Adams: The industry absolutely needs to diversify its work force and also to learn to reach other kinds of players beyond "straight male gamers." Straight male gamers are a solved problem, done and dusted. The question is, can straight male game developers learn to make games for gay, or female, or older, or non-Western gamers? I believe they can and damn well should; but in addition, I feel that the industry would benefit enormously from a more diverse work force. Even with the best will in the world, a man isn't necessarily going to know what appeals to women — and more importantly, what turns them off. We need fresh perspectives. (Pearse, 2011b, April 8)

For Adams and BioWare's David Gaider, hiring designers who are not straight white men is necessary. Not only do inclusive gaming strategies encourage game development that targets more diverse gamers, but they also teach designers how to design games that they may not have originally considered. Adams wants to see everyone included in design considerations, regardless of age, ethnicity, or sexuality. Roleplaying games may provide designers with one genre to expand these possibilities because they allow gamers to play as they are. At the end, this desire to hire a more diverse workforce parallels Cassell's (1998) call for feminist design in video games. With a more diverse workforce, as Adams suggested, women would be *making* games, and more people may have their own experiences heard and acknowledged. Moreover, Sheri Graner Ray made this call for equality and diversity even clearer when she explained that "we won't have that answer [of why women aren't interested in gaming] until we see 50 percent of our playing audience is female, and 50 percent of our workforce is female. That's the dream, and one I'm looking forward to" (Winegarner, 2005, March 14). More women working in video game design mean that greater opportunities for women's participation exist.

This egalitarian participation and representation is important, for as Alexander (2009) noted, players who play in worlds inhabited by diverse characters and avatars have the ability to develop "multicultural literacies" and "critical literacies" through gameplay. These new literacies specifically ask players to reconsider the assumptions they bring to the gameworld. For instance, the characters in *World of Warcraft*, as noted above, are comprised of avatars and NPCs from different races. The game's background story includes a race war in which players participate. From an interview with two gamers, Mike and Matt, Alexander (2009) reported that gamers are able to "reflect on how games are products of or reflective of specific ideological investments or values." This type of reflection led Mike to

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*Was Alone* and *Way* may also appeal to adults interested in collaboration and story telling. These new games, in many ways, are bringing to life many of Kaffai's (1998) and Cassell's (1998) strategies to engage different types of players while at the same time building skills outside of the gameworld.

"[make] connections among race, conflict, and language, to wit, an inability to communicate successfully and mutually interrogate assumptions may exacerbate preexisting biases or hostilities" (Alexander, 2009, p. 45). When players examine the race wars in RPGs, and these conflicts are not confined to MMORPGs but are also found in single-player games like the *Mass Effect* (2007) series where non-human races in the game also represent offline racial tensions, gamers may consider why racial tension and racism happens, and what actions must be taken in the offline world to move forward. Though Boulter (2005) believed that the online world cannot change the offline world, players' own experiences in-game can change their preconceptions outside of the game through these "critical literacies."

Play can be a powerful mechanism for people learning to perform identity and develop their multimodal literacies. For some women, technology may help them navigate the necessary feminine and heroic characteristics they are expected to embody in the offline world. For others, RPGs allow them to see themselves reflected for the first time, and still others take advantage of inhabiting fantastic worlds within which to experiment. Though there are certainly complications, roleplaying games can provide a mediated space in which to explore and experiment with identity.

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