Gender Swapping as a Defensive Mechanism in MMOs

ABSTRACT

Internet users have prominently adopted the construction of different self-presentations in the computer mediated environment with the sole purpose of staying in line with the norms (Higgins et al., 1987). This paper focuses on how gender swapping functions as a defensive mechanism against sexism, homophobia and harassment in Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs). It explores the shift of identity in MMOs through female objectification, the co-relation of heterogeneity and specificity of gender representation and sexuality. It also examines why male gamers swap despite the fact that games are perceived as a male dominant platform and provides an analysis on toxic masculinity.

KEYWORDS: MMOs, Gender performativity, Gender swapping, Male dominance platform, Heteronormativity, Trolling, Hypersexualisation

Introduction

In the saturated culture of language and logistics of gaming, gendered ideologies have infiltrated and perpetuated over the contours of the gaming community. The line between virtual and real world is becoming blurrier and more complex to the extent, the player is so engrossed in the virtual realm that the latter perceives it as a reality instead of a medium of fantasy and escapism. These further spurs the unconscious melding of two different identities through gender swapping in the game. Huh and Williams (2010) described in-game gender swapping as a contrast between the gender embodied by the player and that of main character. Bruckman (1999) suggested that the intangibility and malleability of Massively Multiplayer Online (MMOs) video games has rendered gender and identity as questionable. Jenkins (2006) suggested that gender and identity are merely multi-layered social constructs. MMOs have pushed gamers to the peripheral with the prevalence of a

spurious hierarchy converging with anarchy. This seemingly stressful venture has forced them to seek gender swapping. Gender swapping is arguably a defense mechanism in MMOs against sexism, homophobia and harassment. Pertaining to the this, it is without an iota of doubt that gamers have adopted gender swapping to 1) eschew unwanted attention and sexual advances, 2) experiment with their desired gender and sexuality and 3) avoid trolls and harassment. The first part of paper adheres to the sexual objectification of women in relation with Frederickson's theory of objectification and Hall's notion of identity. The second part explores the normative views inculcated in the society, complying to in-games marriage and the relationship between Goffman and Butler 's notion of identity performativity. The last part illustrates the ever-present phenomenon of trollism, harassment and identity exploitation.

Hypersexualisation in the gaming space

Despite the emancipation of women in the gaming community, MMOs are still perceived as a male domineering variant. The pervasiveness of masculinity has pushed both male and female players to embody cross gender play so as to envision a sense of equality and power in the games. According to Butler's study on the performance of gender which suggests that people maintained their identity based on stereotypes, it is justified to claim that the non-normative nature of gender swapping with the very normative behavior of female objectification enhance a certain conundrum of subjectivity which lies in the gameplay itself, hence it cannot be subverted; one can either conform and play the game or not play at all. A study conducted by Hussain and Griffiths (2008) on the Everquest forums drew insight on the particular choice of gamers - 70% of female players have sought gender swapping to impede any notorious innuendo. The prevalence for this behavior results from the hostility raised during multiplayer interactions as the male subject contends to the idea that the female counterpart is transgressing his territory which alternately triggers him to opulently objectify the female gamers through unrequited attention, vulgar language and sexual harassment. While the male gamers seek objectification as a defense to the

supposedly intrusion of women, the latter tend to gender swap to counteract any personal attacks. Fox and Tang (2013) reported that 10% of online gamers are victims of sexism. The virulent situation is further exacerbated by the portrayal of the female characters in MMOs. As an illustration to this, League of legends and Tree of savior overtly depicts the vehemence of hyper sexualisation of its female characters through the portrayal of inhumanely curvaceous body line; disturbingly narrow waist, painfully swivel-spine, abnormally large breasts and entrenched skimpy clothes as armor. Though the female avatar is as strong and tough as the male character, hypersexualisation downplays her power and strength. This aspect of encroachment and hypersexualisation stem from the fabric norms of the society where the woman is symptomatic to submission, othering and desirability (Derrida.1997) . This dichotomy between gamers have promiscuously compelled the female gamers to alter their identity in the male-centric platforms to foster a sense of belonging and security. Griffiths et al. (2016) highlight that gender swapping among female gamers has ironically envisaged an inexorable momentum of hypermasculinity within their online performance. Jones and Pitman (1982) described this type of self-performance as an attempt to garner attention and expand one's credentials through flattery. In the same wavelength, the presentation of the female players in the male mediatic space aligned with Goffman's theory of the presentation of the self in accordance to the notion of the society, where the society here is the virtual gaming community. A comprehensive view of this exchange of identity can be further built on Fredrickson and Roberts (1998)' s theory of objectification, which discuss about how socializing with others entail women to think of themselves as an object. Nevertheless, this concept reflects and refracts Bucholtz and Hall (2005)'s definition of identity – "a discursive construct that emerges in interaction." The pertinent question remains "is gender identity falling under the contention of a commodity or is it a threat to our own security?"

Heteronormativity in in-game marriage

Cross-gender play has been an instrumental tool in constructing a synergy of freedom in MMOs where players have the autonomy to experiment with their desired gendered and sexualized identities, thus this synergy of freedom is indicative to the fact that gender swapping acts as a defensive barrier against sexual prejudices. Consequently, this aspect of gender-performativity completely harmonizes with the virtual world, making it more idealistic and materialistic than the reality. The foregoing segment demystifies gender swapping in the online game, Audition which is a Chinese massive multiplayer online game, incorporating a marriage system, commonly referred as in-game marriage. The concept of in-games marriage is a commodified product of cyber-marriage and has later been inculcated in game-scenarios where players articulate and mimic the narration of a marital life. In Audition , the aim of the virtual marriage with other players is to endow the couple with commitment, loyalty and responsibilities which are the basic foundation of a relationship. However, being a replica of the contemporary Chinese post socialist society, the gameplay of Audition sticks with the normative metric of heterosexuality, alienating homosexuality (Jackson,2003). In the same vein, Huh and Williams (2010) claim that to eschew this paradigm of normativity, homosexual players are likely to gender swap as they feel more comfortable in the skin of the opposite genders which in turn allow them to get marry to "their desired gender". Besides, the impersonation of either male or female to seek intimacy in in-game marriage may unravel homosexual sentiments (Wu et al, 2007). In compliance to this, in-game marriage is intrinsically linked to the Goffman's metaphor of stage performance in certain aspect of homosexuality. The front stage is the society where players abide by the behavioral and institutionalized norms- conducive for homosexuals to hide their sexual orientation to preclude harassment and conflict whereas Audition represents part of the backstage where gender swapping has permitted them to get acquainted to their true self. In addition to this, in-game marriage engenders the players to rehearse their front stage performance through virtual marriage by learning and experiencing emotional and social intimacy which are part and parcel of the offline society. Owing to the stage performance, Butler (1993) drew on the idea that gender is symptomatic

to parody - "some gender performances are more parodic than the others." It is without an iota of doubt that this concept of parody is a product of Goffman's notion of performativity. In contrast to this, gender swapping and the connection formed with the avatar choice can be perceived as strategic techniques used by the LGBT gamers to eschew this paradigm of normativity in Audition without regressing their identity and sexuality. However, there exists a fine line between the cross-gender play in regards to homosexuality and its purpose. For instance, straight females create secondary male avatars to marry their friends who are also heterosexual female using the female avatar. This depicts that the gender swap is just a layer that will provide the female gamers with couple related benefits and does not always manifest a defensive nature (Freeman, 2015). The oxymoron inheres that cross-gender play is not incumbent to the reconstruction of the online identity, rather it empowers novelty and fun.

Trolling

The conspicuousness of toxic masculinity in the gaming community has been an antecedent for not only female but also male figures to become prone for gender swapping. The adherence to the swap has been stimulated by trolling. Condis (2015) defined trolling as a coping mechanism of masculine brand of textual identity performance which is embedded in the gaming culture. This discursive performance of masculinity instills a perception of power and privilege. Trolls usually indulge in insidious behaviors with an obnoxious self-presentation either to defame those who posed as a threat to their culture or for entertainment purposes (Wang,1998). Male players including newbies often seek cross-gender play in fear of displaying insufficient masculinity through distinct language or accurate enunciation of heterosexism, thus they developed certain immunity against trolls with gender swapping. Waddell et al. (2013) connoted that by making sexual overtures and interacting with male players in the skin of an attractive female avatar, the main objective is to maintain a competitive advantage over the gamers. A notable example of gender swapping for competitive advantage remains in the MMORPGs, Bless Online where the male players indulging in cross-gender play subsequently target monetary gains and

weapons from other players. In spite of their female avatar, these players are still susceptible to trollers. When a male player falls into prey of trollers, they spontaneously lose their mask of masculinity. These forms of trolling become the blueprints of the society's architecture; they shape contextual performances that permeate within the cultural norms and thus the very same norms, behaviors and attitudes are imported into the fabric of the gameplay and thus become pioneer of our self-presentation. Hence, this masquerade of trollism in the gaming community is a conflation of bogus assumptions about gendered codes seeping into identity. Nonetheless, the act of gender swapping is contingent to trolling being a manoeuvre of identity deception and an intentional fallacy to misled the trolls so as to protect themselves (Addis,2010). Another exemplary example is trollers equally solicit gender swapping to bait others. An exemplary example is demonstrated in The Legend of Zelda in which the protagonist (Link) rescues the princess (Zelda). The troll intentionally devised a plan in which he used the name 'Zelda' and the protagonist to exhibit confusion among player. According to Cummings (2015), the enactments of trolls which have been socially constructed out of boredom, revenge or entertainment are described as performative since they are outcomes of corporeality and discursive means; the prevalence adoptions of vices like deception, bullying, inequality and sexism. However, Butler (1993) argued that the appetence to troll other gamers is the consequence of an internal substance which mirrors on the external surface of oneself through our performance but it does not blame the principles of identity as its cause. With regards to the oxymorous argument, performance of the troll is not assessed as a deliberate act, but as a repetitive and allusion practice.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the gameplay and the gaming communities will always endorse the hypersexualisation of female gamers and avatars. Female players have adopted a silent participation through gender swapping, considering it as a coping defensive mechanism - conducive to the pervasiveness of sexism which undeniably promotes the rape culture and reinforces the stereotypes about femininity and masculinity. Despite the adaptation of

heteronormative view in Audition, gamers were able to experience opposite gender roles and become acquainted with their 'real' identity. Lastly, trollism connotes an interesting relationship of how the aspect of protecting oneself through gender swap intersects with the masquerade and identity. The limitation of the paper was that the research for the heteronormative part was purely based on China post-socialist society. Another contention is that very little research has been conducted on trollism and gender swapping. Further research can explore strategies to subvert sexism on the gaming platforms and a medium to identify and punish the misogynists. The emergence of trollism can also be further examined.

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