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Coding Gender: Performance and Gender Identity in a Synthetic World

With the advent of improved technologies and the subsequent evolution of immersive Internet gaming from the text-based multi-user dungeon (MUD) into its present form as the massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG), game developers now create vast, visually appealing, and compelling “virtual worlds” in which players, represented by an avatar, may interact with other users and the virtual world itself. Regardless of the milieu, at present, all MMORPGs require an avatar (conventionally known as a “player character” or “PC” to distinguish it from AI-controlled characters with limited dynamism known as “non-player characters” or “NPC”). While many have built upon Lisa Nakamura’s essay “Race In/For Cyberspace” and examined the performance (or the non-performance) of race and racial identity within the various MMORPGs, surprisingly few have chosen to examine the role of gender identity within virtual worlds.

Yet, as more people begin to occupy the liminal space of these synthetic worlds¹, a great deal of consideration should be paid toward the depiction of gender therein. Gender performance and identity, in much the same manner as race, in a synthetic world, such as

¹ Edward Castronova, in the introduction to his book *Synthetic Worlds: the Business and Culture of Online Games*, after describing the software technology of an MMORPG as a “practical virtual reality tool,” defines his term “synthetic worlds” as “crafted places inside computers that are designed to accommodate large numbers of people.” Cf. Castronova, Edward, *Synthetic Worlds: The Business and Culture of Online Games* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005): 4.

Norrath in Sony Online Entertainment's (SOE) game *EverQuest II*, is mediated by the programming of the world, the underlying diegesis of the milieu (also known as the game "lore"), and real-world stereotypes derived from European models of masculinity and femininity which are inherently phantasmatic in nature.

From the outset, it is important to understand the computer software code gives definition to the player's experience of gender within *EverQuest II* (EQ2). At the risk of being reductive, the programming of the game functions in essence as the laws of physics within the synthetic world of Norrath. Within this programming framework, teams of developers and artists create everything from the small cat wandering a city street in a beautifully rendered city to fantastic creatures with which the players interact. However, as mentioned previously, before a player may begin to interact with the world of Norrath, they must first create an avatar to do so.

Although the process of creating an avatar varies depending on the game, in EQ2, it consists of the following steps: choosing a race, choosing a gender, adjusting your appearance within the constraints of the program, choosing a "class" (or profession), and, finally, selecting a name. It is important to note that in EQ2, unlike *Second Life* where players may subsequently alter their characters through additions and modifications to the coding, players have relatively limited flexibility in altering the physical attributes of their characters and must utilize models generated by the artists.

It is interesting to note that despite the fact that the MUD, LambdaMOO, which Nakamura studied was text-based and, consequently, much cruder technologically than EQ2, in one aspect LambdaMOO was somewhat more advanced. While LambdaMOO, like EQ2 does at present, required participants to select a gender while creating what Nakamura termed a "cybernetic identity"—the precursor to the avatar—LambdaMOO offered its users the option to

create a genderless² cybernetic identity; however, the avatar generation process of EQ2 operates within a continuum wherein gender choices are confined to the binary option of male and female. By eliminating a genderless option, from the earliest stage of avatar generation, players are required *ipso facto* to adopt an interpretation of masculinity and femininity that is not their own, although this interpretation may be one with which they agree or the “naturalness” of which they may reproduce. While this may appear relatively harmless, there are far-reaching consequences as a result of this identity colonization which must be examined.

While studies such as Jamie Loke’s essay “Identity and Gender in *Second Life*” focus primarily upon depictions of femininity and the female body, in order to possess a holistic understanding of the performance of gender within a synthetic world such as Norrath, it is important to examine how the male/female binary is performed and how the masculine/feminine are inscribed. Thus care will be taken to examine both. Moreover, before continuing further, it is important to note that this critique of EQ2 presupposes that there was no intent on the part of the development team to cater—owing in large part to the considerable number of women working on the EQ2 development team—toward sexist attitudes. Rather these attitudes toward gender are, as Higgins suggests with race, largely derived from the tradition of high fantasy which was, as he explains, first developed in the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis (although he ignores the contributions to and mutations of the genre as it was enormously expanded upon by later authors), which he situates as “the ancestry of contemporary MMORPGs that rely heavily on these formative texts as cultural reference”(11), and have crept subconsciously into the synthetic

² It must be noted, however, that within the milieu of the MUD, the Spivak and neuter options were, according to Nakamura, deemed a “deferred choice” by other users who subsequently requested those who had made the choice to be gender neutral to “set a gender.” See Nakamura, Lisa, “Race In/For Cyberspace,” *The Cybercultures Reader*, eds. David Bell and Barbara Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2000): 719 note 2.

world of Norrath. To illustrate the coding of gender in Norrath, it is necessary to examine in some detail several of the character races, clothing, and “emotes.”

As there are a vast number of races from which to choose, for the purposes of this paper, only the models of the human, barbarian, high elf, and iksar (a race of sentient humanoid lizard people) races will be examined. The humans in Norrath are, for all intents and purposes, identical to *Homo sapiens*. They are, within the “lore” of the game, the most numerous of races. Barbarians are similar in appearance to the humans but are depicted as taller and more muscular. In terms of the “lore”, they are, broadly, an amalgamation of the Scots and the Norse. The high elves are humanoid, yet are different in appearance from the humans and barbarians as they are taller than both races. Additionally, the high elves, according to high fantasy stereotype, are lithe (although they still enjoy well muscled physiques), slightly more delicately featured, and possess pointed ears. Although the depiction of race is not the focus of this paper, it is interesting to note that while it is possible for a player to create a non-white human or barbarian³, the skin color available to high elves (who are, according to game “lore”, exemplars of all that is good) is limited to what may only be described as white—regardless of the skin tone chosen by the player. Finally, as representative of more alien races found in EQ2, the iksar are similar in shape to the humans, barbarians, and high elves. However, they are depicted with a scaled skin, lizard-like heads with crests, and tails. The iksar, like the other races, demonstrate readily perceptible sexual dimorphism—female iksar possess more elaborate crests, and are smaller physically than the male iksar.

³ In *EverQuest*, the predecessor of *EverQuest II*, barbarians could not be depicted as any race but white. For an in-depth examination of race and its performance in massively-multiplayer online role-playing games, see Higgin’s essay “Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games.”

The coding of the masculine body for these races, however, is nearly identical. Barring minor differences in height, hair color and style, eye color, tattoos and other such alterable appearance options, the form of the body which cannot be modified itself is the same, even in non-human, non-mammalian races. Masculinity is embodied in Norrath as uniformly muscular and in a superb physical condition typically equated with the exceptionally athletic. Male avatars are also designed and coded to walk and run with a normal human gait.

The clothing options available for male avatars, like those of female avatars, mimic broadly defined fantasy concepts of clothing and armor which correlate with the class archetypes⁴—cloth robes for mages, leather or chain armor for rogues, scouts, and certain types of healers, and plate armor for the fighter classes and some healers. For the most part, these armor options tend to be uniform in nature if wildly different in appearance (often with fantastic appurtenances which make them decidedly unrealistic, *e.g.* large spikes on the shoulders). In addition to the armor worn by characters, however, is what is known as the “rp gear” or clothing worn for role-playing purposes—such as a story-telling session at a pub or an in-game feast—when armor would be inappropriate. For male avatars, the standard non-armor clothing option⁵ (other than a robe) consists of a short-sleeved shirt, pants, and boots. Unlike armor which is comprised of seven pieces (head, shoulders, chest, forearms, gloves, legs, and feet), this role-playing clothing consists of one piece which is equipped to the chest slot. This clothing is uniform in appearance, although players may choose to purchase it in different colors. It is unremarkable and generally quite drab in appearance. The “formal dress” option (which

⁴ There are exceptions to this, however, and with the addition of “appearance slots” in EQ2 which enable the players to equip their avatars with whatever clothing or armor they choose based strictly on its appearance rather than its functionality, mage characters may be seen wearing full plate armor.

⁵ Owing to its generally drab appearance, this style of clothing is frequently referred to by players as “farmhand clothes.”

functions like the standard clothing) consists of a form-fitting, sleeveless shirt, pants, and boots with matching detached sleeves which leave the shoulders bare and a decorative belt. This clothing is arguably less drab (although, there are fewer styles of this type of clothing than the other and commensurately fewer color options) than the standard clothing and emphasizes the physique of the avatar to a much greater degree without overtly sexualizing the avatar. Non-armor clothing options for female characters differ from those available to male characters and will be discussed later. Overall, the clothing options available to the male avatars may be assessed as unremarkable, non-sexual, and in keeping, for the most part, with real world expectations of male attire.

The physical appearance of the female character models appears to mimic the sexual dimorphism of *Homo sapiens* regardless of the race. The bodies of the female characters are, like the male models, presented as being in superb physical shape. Nevertheless, the female models of the humans, barbarians, high elves and iksar are less physically imposing than the male. They tend to be shorter and less muscular than their male counterparts. Although, when creating a character, the range of height for both sexes does overlap and, depending on the tastes of the player, there may be female avatars taller than males. This, in itself, is unremarkable if we accept that these races exhibit the same types of gender-based physical differences. It would seem likely that the game designers chose to maintain these forms of physical differences based on *Homo sapiens* sexual dimorphism and assign it to these fictional races rather than explore different concepts so as to provide players with a familiar framework in order to encourage and bolster the willing suspension of disbelief that players must engage in for the world to become truly immersive. Further, unlike the male avatars, females are designed to walk with an exaggerated, swaying gait most typically associated with catwalk models.

Yet, the physical coding of the female characters is not wholly innocuous. First, all of the female models are—with the exception of the iksar—depicted as having uniformly large breasts. In a like manner, the female models (including the iksar) have exaggeratedly narrow waists which are best described as a wasp waist. In the real world, women of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries achieved these exceptionally small waists through the use of corsetry and other such forms of body modification in an effort to adhere to the contemporaneous ideals of feminine beauty. As this form is unobtainable naturally and serves to draw attention to the bust and hips, that the female models are coded thus suggests intent to subtly emphasize the already large breasts thus reifying women as sexual objects at the most fundamental level.

Female fashions in both “rp gear” and armor share certain similarities to the options available to male avatars. Armor options are identical to those available to males, except that (with the exception of the cloth robe) attention is again drawn to the bust by the construction of the armor to emphasize each breast individually. That this would be both impracticable and uncomfortable to wear for extended periods hardly needs mentioning; yet, players accept this without comment. The “rp gear” available to female avatars, like that for the males, consist of the “formal” and the standard options. The standard option is best described as having long, gathered sleeves, a closely fitted bodice, and full skirt reminiscent of certain forms of medieval attire—except that the skirt of the dress has been cut out to reveal the legs from the upper thigh to the ankles. Inexplicably, female avatars when wearing this dress are incapable of wearing shoes and thus appear barefoot. Like the male standard option for clothing, the pattern remains the same but may vary in color according to the tastes of the player. The formal option for clothing is even more revealing than the standard option. Similar to the male option, it has detached sleeves which leave the shoulders bare. The midriff is bare from slightly below the bust

and much like the standard option the legs are bare to the hips—albeit with what appears to be decorative shin coverings—with a triangular piece of cloth covering the avatar’s groin. Both styles of clothing are incredibly and unnecessarily sexualized; the former serving only to reinforce, in a seemingly innocent or apologetic manner, sexist behaviors and attitudes and the latter does not even attempt to disguise the role of women as sexual objects. Should a player desire more modest clothing for their avatar, there does exist a robe that has a full, ankle length skirt, long sleeves, and covers the entire upper body to the neck. Thus the clothing options for women appear to reinforce the stereotype of women as either sluts or virgins.

Curiously, should a player equip a male avatar with female clothing (or a female with male clothing) the clothing appearance changes to match that of the gender of the avatar wearing it. Thus, if the male avatar were to equip a female formal dress, it would appear as if he’s wearing the male version of the formal clothing that he’s wearing. In an instance where the heteronormative matrix is seen to be rigidly enforced, cross-dressing is disallowed within the realm of EQ2. Although, it can be argued that players adopting a differently gendered avatar is a form of cross-dressing or identity tourism. As Nakamura discussed in her essay “Race In/For Cyberspace,” many of the female personae of LambdaMOO were actually male; “it is commonly known that the relative dearth of women in cyberspace results in a great deal of ‘computer cross-dressing’, or men masquerading as women” (716). However, it is crucial to note that since Nakamura explored LambdaMOO, there has been a significant increase in women online and in games as will be illustrated later. Nevertheless, it is evident that the developers of EQ2 did not feel that a depiction of queer gender identities was appropriate for the high fantasy setting of the game.

As with many other MMORPGs, there are a variety of “emotes” coded into the game. These emotes are frequently used “slash commands” (so called because the command entered to perform these emotes are preceded by a forward slash, *e.g.* /bow to make your avatar bow) which help foster the role-playing and social aspects of the world. The vast majority of emotes are identical for male and female avatars. However, one is very different because of gender: the flirt “emote.” When player controlling a male avatar /flirts, the avatar somewhat bashfully runs his hands through his hair while shifting his weight from one foot to another while saying an innocuous phrase such as the high elf male’s remark, “Your eyes are like stars in the sky” before finally pointing with both hands at whomever (or whatever) the emote is directed. The time it takes for the avatar to complete this emote is a little over ten seconds. On the other hand, female avatars have a much more elaborate emote. Beginning with a comment like the barbarian female’s, “Do you know how to keep warm in the winter?” the female avatar proceeds to pose in a series of sexually charged poses one would associate with burlesque shows including miming pulling off gloves with the teeth, suggestively shaking the upper body to emphasize the bust, and others of a similar nature. The duration of the female avatar’s flirt “emote” is thirty seconds in length—three times as long as the male version and greatly eroticized. Further, the coy (and completely disingenuous) comment, from the female avatar when coupled with the flirt “emote” at once suggests and reifies her as a sexual object.

Thus, taken as a whole, the computer code written by the game developers of EQ2 creates male avatars that are largely embodied and performed according to Western expectations of masculinity. They are depicted as being excellent physical condition; the clothing options for male avatars are remarkable chiefly for being uniformly unremarkable and non-eroticized; and the “emotes”, like the clothing, are undistinguished. Yet, it would be a grave error to assume that

this lack of distinguishing features serves no purpose. Indeed, the depiction of masculinity in EQ2 instantiates and defines the heteronormative matrix within the programming of the synthetic world of Norrath. Consequently, the female avatar with her wasp-waisted physique, highly sexualized clothing, eroticized gait, and sexually suggestive “emote” is fundamentally depicted as a failed copy of the male.

Although the physics of the synthetic world of Norrath, which are determined by the code written by the game developers, define the physical appearance and performance of the avatar within Norrath, the culture of the world is similarly defined by the diegesis created by the development team and presented in what is called “lore.” This externally defined “lore” functions broadly as a narrative which provides contextual information for players and as an inculcated shared history which must assimilate the participant to some extent. While it is entirely possible to remain ignorant of specifics of game “lore,” much like one may be ignorant of the various causes which lead to the First World War; its influence cannot be avoided. Before discussing the role and depiction of gender within the game “lore,” it is significant that the constructed history of Norrath is not referred to as such, instead “lore” was chosen most likely owing to its obsolete definition as “a body of knowledge.” While this is clearly an attempt to bolster the quasi-medieval high fantasy milieu, the particularized definition of “lore” is unrelated to history but is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “a piece of teaching or instruction; a lesson.”

Since the creation of Norrath for SOE’s earlier MMORPG, *EverQuest*, a great deal of game “lore” has accumulated. Although set in the same synthetic world and drawing upon much of the original material found in *EverQuest*, the Norrath of EQ2 is canonically an alternate reality. Thus, EQ2 players need not be familiar with the game “lore” of the original *EverQuest* in order

to make sense of the world around them. As the accumulated “lore” of the milieu is of sufficient length and detail as to be beyond the scope of this paper, only specific examples will be discussed.

Briefly, the world of Norrath exemplifies (and is divided along) the good versus evil dichotomy that is a familiar trope in high fantasy. Races, classes⁶, and cities are all defined to a certain degree by their “alignment.” Thus, in Norrath, alignments may be defined as good, neutral, or evil. This is a simplification of a complex system, which was promulgated in the “pen-and-paper” role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons*, which explains the moral and ethical perspective of the subject. The conflict driving the narrative of EQ2 arises from the rivalry between the good and evil factions found in Norrath. In much the same manner as Minas Tirith was set in opposition to the evil of Sauron at Barad-Dûr in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy; the creatively named Qeynos (Sony EQ spelled backwards) is set in opposition to the evil Freeport. The most important political figures are Antonia Bayle, the queen of Qeynos, and Lucan D’Lere, the military dictator of Freeport. Consequently, the conflict between good and evil is frequently illustrated within the game as a personal conflict between Antonia Bayle and Lucan D’Lere.

Within the scope of the game “lore,” there is no distinction between the genders in terms of power. Women may choose any profession that they wish and may be as powerful or as wealthy as any male. Gender discrimination and sexism, according to the “lore,” does not exist in Norrath. This is reflected (to some extent) by the lack of gender restrictions upon character classes, maximum level, wealth, or any of the other indicators of gender discrimination. Yet this

⁶ Recent changes have eliminated many of the alignment requirements for character classes; however, some do remain in place.

state of gender equality is ultimately proven to be phantasmatic as a result of the manner in which the genders of the most prominent characters are inscribed.

One of the most noticeable illustrations of this is the manner in which Antonia Bayle is portrayed. As the leader of the city of Qeynos, the effective physical representative of the good alignment, and ostensibly possessing a great deal of personal power and agency in consequence, Antonia is, in theory, an exemplar of gender equality. Yet Antonia depicted wearing the highly eroticized formal clothing specific to female avatars is a victim of aggressive sexualization which undermines her authority as a leader as her body which has been colonized by the heteronormative matrix coded into the game, according to Berlant, is “not abstract, but hyper-embodied, an obstacle and not a vehicle to public pleasure and power” (114). Moreover, her characterization as the innocent (if highly sexualized), champion of good when juxtaposed with the physically aggressive, highly charismatic, and ruthless character of Lucan D’Lere, subtly reifies the perception of women as weak and potential victims of masculine conquest.

Another example of this subtle, yet systematic, undermining of female authority and power may be found in the relationship between the characters Lenya Thex and Mayong Mistmoore. Thex is the queen of the high elves who, as a race, epitomize goodness. Mistmoore, on the other hand, is an exceptionally powerful and exceptionally evil vampire lord. After an attack upon the high elves’ home land which results in the death of Thex’s father, Mistmoore capitalizes upon the confusion to infiltrate Thex’s inner circle, prey upon her grief, and subsequently turn her into a vampire as well. This entire episode is merely retelling the classic story of the sexually transgressive male who, assigned the form of the vampire, pursues and ultimately dominates the chaste female. While its fantastical nature makes it an obvious choice for inclusion in the milieu, by making the object of the vampire’s pursuit an empowered woman,

the developers have subtly reinforced the stereotype of powerful women being inherently less powerful than a man.

Although, at first glance, EQ2 appears to have eliminated some of the forms of gender inequality which plagues the real world, it has in fact done nothing of the sort. Instead, many of the stereotypes of masculinity and femininity have been reproduced within the bounds of the synthetic world as is evident by the coding and the diegesis of the milieu. With the ability to create an entirely new world and culture free of harmful gender stereotypes, the question to ask is why has this not been done? The most common (and the most facile) answer is that developers are catering to the teen-aged boys who make up the bulk of the gaming population. Yet, according to information contained in the study “2010 Essential Facts about the Computer and Video Game Industry” released by the Entertainment Software Association, forty percent of gamers are women and that “women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (33%) than boys age 17 or younger (20%)” (3). With such a significant number of women gamers, why does it matter if women are coded as sexual objects and failed copies of the male in EQ2?

First, as players create their character and enter a synthetic world such as Norrath, it is evident that the player begins to identify closely with their avatar. Castronova writes of this phenomenon:

Second, as you became immersed in the synthetic world, there were three moments worth pausing and reflecting over. The first occurred at the moment the avatar’s attributes felt like they were your own personal attributes. This step appears to be psychologically natural, because the avatar is just an extension of

your body into a new space. The body is the tool by which the mind receives sensation and manipulates the environment, and this avatar body does exactly and only that. And it makes sense to think of it as *your* body, just as someone with a prosthetic arm should think of it as *his* arm. Coming to own the avatar, psychologically, is so natural among those who spend time in synthetic worlds that it is barely noticed. No one ever says, “My character’s strength is depleted,” or, “my avatar owns a dune buggy.” They say, “my strength” and “my dune buggy” (45).

Castronova’s observations strike at the root of the issue. The psychological connection between the player and their avatar provides a means for the inscription of gender in the synthetic world to colonize the real world thus reinforcing negative gender stereotypes. Furthermore, Loke, in her study of *Second Life*, illustrates why this kind of blatant objectification of women in a synthetic world is extremely harmful when she explains that “[O]ut of the fifty female players interviewed, all of them have claimed their success in *Second Life* because of their attractive avatar but more importantly, also their unhappiness in real life because of how they look in reality” (154).

Moreover, by reifying Western gender stereotypes, the developers of EQ2 have, in effect, established a form of identity tourism based on gender instead of race. As Nakamura explains of identity tourism, “the suppression of racial discourse which does not conform to familiar stereotypes, and the enactment of notions of the Oriental which do conform to them, extends the promise of mobility and exchange only to those who wish to change their identities to fit accepted norms ,” (71). While Nakamura is dealing specifically with race, the point she is making may be easily applied to this issue. Thus, by portraying female avatars according to

familiar stereotypes, the developers unwittingly encourage a performance of femininity that is inherently repressive.

Ultimately, the developers of *EverQuest II* while attempting, at some level, to be inclusive and promote gender equality have failed in this mission by deciding that an honest discussion of gender roles has no place within a high fantasy milieu. From the coding which creates the avatar, its mannerisms, and its clothing to the depiction of empowered women within the narrative “lore” of the milieu, women are consistently inscribed as failed copies of an idealized form of Western masculinity. Owing to the psychological bond that is formed with the avatar this is harmful to women as it reinforces and perpetuates highly sexist attitudes and it represses men who do not adhere to culturally expected performances of masculinity. Only when game developers cease to code gender according to the idealized forms depicted in high fantasy and engage in an open discussion of gender will these harmful effects be ameliorated.

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