Exploring the uses and importance of avatar dress in a multiplayer online game:
A qualitative study of women gamers

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Background: Massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) are virtual worlds accessed through the Internet that can be inhabited by many people at the same time. MMOs feature avatars, or virtual full-body characters, that permit the individual at the computer to move through and interact with the online 3D landscape and other players. While at their most basic level MMOs are games designed to offer a variety of challenges to players, the existence of avatars and the social nature of these worlds combine to offer scholars a novel venue in which to consider a wide variety of social, cultural, and psychological questions. Indeed, game studies is a thriving area of scholarly discourse (Nardi, 2009), and researchers from a variety of fields, including anthropology, sociology, communication, and psychology, have conducted studies inside MMOs. To date, however, little has been written about dress as it occurs in MMOs (Klastrup & Tosca (2009) is a rare exception). In spite of this lack of attention, it may be argued that dress is central to many aspects of life in MMOs.

Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore the uses of dress in the gaming activities of female MMO players. Women were chosen as the focus of this study in response to a call from scholars who noted the relative dearth of qualitative research about female gamers (Lewis & Griffiths, 2011). Three main research questions were developed: (1) Which gaming activities are most associated with dress for study participants?; (2) How is dress incorporated into these activities?; and (3) Is dress utilized to explore questions of identity or to develop and maintain social relationships?

Method: The research described in this paper was a qualitative study of female gamers in the MMO game Lord of the Rings Online (LOTRO). Participants were solicited in two ways: first, the researcher entered the game world to broadcast a request for volunteers on a chat channel to which all players have access, which was followed by postings placed on a LOTRO fan blog. Thirteen women took part in semi-structured interviews with the researcher via Skype or telephone. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Using the constant comparative method, transcriptions were coded and overarching themes were discovered. As a member of the LOTRO gaming community, the researcher also employed participant observation, bringing her own background to the topic. In addition, a second coder discussed any coding discrepancies with the researcher until inter-rater agreement was achieved.

Results: Several themes relating dress to the MMO gameplaying process emerged. One of the most commonly cited concepts, role play (RP), was defined by respondent Lauren[1] as player-scripted gameplay that "focused on character development and plots." Avatar dress choices were carefully chosen for their relevance to RP storylines and to reflect the biography of the character. Kara consistently dressed an avatar with a mix of elven and hobbit clothing to reflect the character's dual heritage. For Suzanne, dress was closely tied to the avatar's class (or in-game profession). For example, her hunter might wear utilitarian leather armor in the forest.

Like many MMOs, LOTRO has a well-developed crafting system, which allows participants to virtually create items that can be used by avatars. Crafted apparel includes dresses, armor, hats, and cloaks. Kara mentioned that she had been especially excited to enter a particular area in the game world, Lothlorien, because of the beautiful cloak patterns her avatar who is a tailor could purchase there.

Almost all respondents mentioned the social aspect of these games. Most had at least one avatar involved in a kinship, a group of players who regularly play and socialize together, and dress was seen as one way to strengthen relationships between kinship members. Kara's kinship had several storage chests full of clothing that were available to all its members. Marissa said that "one of my very good friends in the kinship… makes me all of my [clothing] dyes."

Dress also enabled identity and gender exploration. Suzanne, a 58-year old gamer, noted, "I always like the character to reflect me." One of her avatars is a hobbit whose apparel has become less vibrant over time, symbolizing a loss of naiveté. Fran created a transgendered character for RP, and dress choices helped develop this avatar and her situation.

Conclusion: This study was an investigation of women's experiences in the MMO Lord of the Rings Online to see what kind of position dress held in their gaming lives. Dress impacted gameplay in several ways, especially role play and crafting. Dress-related activities were usually interwoven with social relationships, and some respondents used it to explore questions of identity, such as gender and sexuality concerns. Although LOTRO's world may seem foreign to non-gamers, this exploratory study suggests that as human beings move more of their lives online, they do not leave their interest in and passions for dress in the offline world. The study of dress's role in virtual lives should take on increasingly greater prominence in the future.

References

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[1] All player names are pseudonyms.