Gendered Gaming: Online Fandom Roleplay and Female Gamers

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There is no question that women game; studies have shown that 52% of the gaming population is female (Jayanth, 2014, p. 1), but the industry and popular stereotypes are still struggling to catch up. I propose digital fandom roleplay as a possible research site for emerging scholarship on women and gaming communities, as it is a female-dominated population with a public, accessible, written archive of interactions, including public and anonymous discourse. Current research into gender and gaming has offered some promising insights into how physical contexts and demographics impact the way women participate in gaming. Considering fandom roleplay as a context for study can bridge the gap between existing work on gender and fanfiction and the present dominant research on female gamers in school settings. It also allows for a different view of an online gaming community than MMOs, where female players are often outnumbered and silenced due to harassment and othering based on their gender. In a topic where much of the conversation is oversimplified due to the difficulty created by social stereotyping and spatial limitations, this digital gaming community could add complexity to analysis of how female gamers navigate their gaming identities in social spaces.

There is no question that women game—to the point that studies have shown that 52% of the gaming population is female (Jayanth, 2014, p. 1)—but the industry and popular stereotypes are still struggling to catch up. Current research has begun to tackle the issue by challenging the perception that women are more reserved when it comes to games or simply less interested, but it needs corroboration in multiple settings and contexts before it can be established as more than anecdotal evidence.

Based on personal experience as a female gamer and roleplayer, I am proposing digital fandom roleplay as a possible research site. It is a female-dominated population, with a public, accessible, written archive of interactions, including public and anonymous discourse. While fandom roleplay has a comparatively small population of gamers compared to regularly studied MMO (massively multiplayer online) or MOBA (multiplayer online battle arena) platforms like *World of Warcraft* or *League of Legends*, it is large enough to encompass a wide range of ages and a variety of discourse types through different games and paratexts.

History and Context

Judith Butler's (1990) groundbreaking work highlighted how complicated it is to pin down the effects and boundaries of gender. Separate from biological sex, gender is constructed socially, with individuals choosing to conform or defy gender norms. It is a performance that can shift with time, expectations, and personal preference. And, while people rarely operate within those narrow dimensions, they are very aware of the social expectations—many of which are biased in application, assuming a mandatory gender binary that puts anything outside of the defined bounds in the position of other (1990, p. 35). Social pressure also changes behavior in ways that may have more to do with trying to behave like people believe they are expected to behave rather than in a way that conforms to their own sense of self and identity (Pelletier, 2008, p. 158). Hence, when boys and girls are asked in a mixed group what games they play, they will list games that are stereotypically masculine (like war games or using consoles) or feminine (simulations and PC), while individual or anonymous questionnaires show a much wider variety of results (p. 156). Students highlighted their socially gendered traits when they were in a setting where there was pressure to perform their gender and distinguish themselves from the other group in the room.

Of course, many of the studies that focus on gender and gaming take place in physical spaces (such as schools), where it is easier to schedule and structure gaming groups or activities. It is easier to observe gender performance and how biological sex and individual presentation affect behaviors through physical interactions, even if the game-play itself is digital rather than analog. In school settings especially, the panoptic effects of observation are clear; whether or not students are truly being watched at any individual

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moment, there is always an expectation of being observed by either educators or peers, and behavior changes accordingly (Foucault, 2011, p. 200). When describing the effects of observation on prisoners, philosopher Michel Foucault explained that, with panopticism, "it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much because he has no need in fact of being so" (p. 201). The risk of being observed is usually enough to impact behavior, whether the individual acting realizes they adjust their performance or not.

This panoptic impact on behavior is why it is especially interesting to consider how embodiment and gender performance operate in digital gaming. Digital spaces allow for both anonymity and for more freedoms due to the lack of physical constraints. Users can choose how to represent themselves through words, pictures, and constructed images and avatars and, with most digital communities, have full control over whether or not they will ever physically meet other members. Performance still occurs, but community members have more potential opportunity to customize elements of that performance that might otherwise be outside of their control (such as biases based on physical appearance or vocal characteristics that can color physical interactions).

In addition, some digital spaces even allow for complete (or almost complete) anonymity by allowing users to post content without attaching an identifiable persona, which can give the impression of the observer finally disappearing and leaving the poster with complete freedom. Savvy internet users are aware of the limitations of this kind of freedom, since even anonymous interactions have identifying features like linked IP addresses, but it takes significantly more effort to link individuals to anonymous digital content than it would with most interactions in physical spaces.

In a 2011 study on disrupting gender expectations in gaming settings, Jennifer Jenson, Stephanie Fisher, and Suzanne de Castell ran two sequential afterschool video game clubs for middle school students. During the first semester, the group included both male and female students with various levels of gaming expertise, while the second semester began with the group being fully composed of female students, with male students only being introduced and integrated after the girls felt comfortable claiming the space as their own. What they discovered was that, when the girls were given the chance to feel like competent gamers before the boys were introduced to the same setting, the girls exhibited the same dominant behaviors that had typically been seen in their male counterparts during the first semester. Jensen, Fisher, and de Castell's study emphasized just how important it is to consider the context of the gaming space and how that impacts behavior in addition to biological gender.

Controlling the demographics enough to disrupt existing biases, however, can be difficult (or even impossible) in settings such as digital gaming where players are assumed to be male. The discrepancy between the perceived and actual audiences perhaps comes from the fact that female-presenting players in mixed gaming spaces often fall lower into the social hierarchy, regardless of their actual competency, becoming common scapegoats for failures (Jensen, Fisher, & de Castell, 2011, pp. 156–157). Women who attempt to assert themselves within digital gaming spaces, particularly those where their co-players are randomly selected or include more than immediate friends, are targeted with comments, insults, and requests that center on female embodiment—from questions about bra-size to jokes about kitchens or rape threats, all excused as typical gamer trash talking or trolling.

Trolling is hardly new to either the internet or gaming, but just as the gaming population has grown in popularity, so has trolling. Online harassment is not limited to singular, easy-to-avoid spaces. It is practically ubiquitous (Phillips, 2015, p. 159). As a result, women gamers in these mixed spaces often feign ignorance or simply stay silent, becoming a non-present presence in order to minimize their exposure to harassment.

If researchers are to gain a better understanding of how gender impacts how female players participate in digital gaming communities, they need to begin to separate context and social hierarchies from gender when parsing how these behavior patterns are constructed. To that purpose, it is necessary for the research to examine both mixed and female-dominated digital spaces in the same way that Jenson, Fisher, and de Castell disrupted the context of physical gaming spaces. To that end, I propose blog-based, fandom roleplay as an ideal gaming community and research opportunity.

The Case for Study

I have been a player-participant in online roleplay communities for nineteen years, starting with old America Online (AOL) chatrooms where each chat represented a new setting, to individual roleplay threads in AOL Instant Messages (AIM). For the past seven years, my main involvement has been specifically with blog-based fandom roleplay, where the majority of the characters are taken from pre-existing texts rather than players creating original characters specifically for the new game. While I currently do not have access to any official data about gender demographics in individual games or the community at large, my long-term experience with the community has peaked my interest due to two notable characteristics:

- The player-base is overwhelmingly female. As such, while speaking with players out of character (where you talk with players as your chosen self-identity, rather than as the character you play in-game), new players are often assumed to be female unless they state otherwise.
- The space includes multiple communities and platforms where players can anonymously comment about games, players, or other issues in a public way, allowing for some of the same anonymous dynamics found in gaming spaces like those seen around Massive Multiplayer Online games (MMOs) or e-sports.

Anonymity, Trolling, and Female Populations

It is worth noting that, unlike many common forums for gaming-behavior research (such as MMOs), behavior regulation is generally managed more through social interaction than through computer or other program-based restrictions. Online roleplay communities also differ from table-top games, which deal with conflicts by rolling dice to determine your success or failure, as most online roleplay games rely on the players to resolve conflicts through negotiation. This negotiation can have consequences when trying to establish if anonymous behavior differs between gender, since online roleplay relies on a surprising amount of social performance linked to a specific player identity, unlike many larger, more anonymous communities. However, in addition to games where researchers can access a wealth of written interactions between named players, there are also two notable forums that are devoted to anonymous commentary: *RPanons*, which allows for anonymous content of all kinds (with some terms of service restrictions on pornographic content or tags that invade other players' privacy), and *Wankgate*, which focuses on complaints about players or games.

These forums are particularly interesting when compared with Mia Consalvo's (2007) research on cheating and other anti-social interactions (such as trolling) in gaming communities. While her initial findings demonstrated that male players were more likely to cheat in multiplayer settings than female players, Consalvo's continued work revealed that, when gender imbalances disappeared or shifted in favor of female communities, women showed a similar willingness and ability to cheat others (pp. 125–126). However, the limited number of easily identifiable, female-dominated communities makes it difficult to corroborate her findings. Examinations of the anonymous interactions in online fandom roleplay can act as a foundation for continuing—and, unfortunately, confirming—her research. *Wankgate,* especially, is notorious for showing the worst stereotypes of anonymous behavior, including doxxing players, bringing in personal information about players' families or private lives to shame or discredit them, using "sock" accounts (fake accounts made to hide the poster's identity and/or make it seem like multiple people are making the same complaint, instead of just one), and other forms of anonymous commentary.

Finding these overlapping behaviors in a forum known to be dominantly female would allow for useful comparisons in frequency, usage, and reception when compared to other, less gendered arenas.

Diverse Contexts

In addition to a dominant female population of gamers, online fandom roleplay takes place in a series of individual games, each of which has their own specific setting and sets of rules but which share a

number of community members. Types of games may include panfandom (where players mix characters from multiple settings), fandom-specific (where the setting or characters must all fit into a specific fandom), adult-specific, genre-specific, and many more. Each game also has its own, individual set of rules for play and community interactions, with some requiring a stringent application process to play, invite-only admittance, or free-for-all participation.

In such a small setting, overlapping membership in games can impact players' reputations within the community. Adult games usually keep their membership lists private for the protection of their players, and even the public record of more general games often becomes subject to discussion on anonymous forums like *Wankgate,* where slow players can be attacked for being in too many games, playing the same character in too many places ("character sitting"), or only playing one type of character.

In addition to affecting their image in the community, having a record to players' activity in many forums can help researchers separate game-specific or character-specific behavior from their general behavior within the community as a whole. For example, a player who is a moderator for one game is likely to be more reserved in their communication because of their position of authority, which can impact a researcher's perception of that player's behavior. But if the same player is also a player in multiple games where they do not have the same authoritative role, researchers can gain a much clearer image of gamers in a larger context. The fact that individual players can be found in multiple, diverse communities allows for a comparison of player performance and identity in a way that studies limited to school or business settings cannot manage.

Online fandom roleplay games also tend to have monthly or bi-monthly How's My Driving (HMD) critiques, where players are encouraged (or even required) to open themselves up to feedback and criticism from other players in the game. This setup creates a written archive of the kinds of commentary and critique that often comes verbally over a mic during MMO gameplay. Critiques can be constructive or as troll-like as one might expect from anonymous commentators, and the resulting discussions can add an interesting dynamic to looking at how female gamers give and receive criticism in gaming—which is particularly useful when looking into gendered critiques about female gamers just not being able to handle it when facing trolling and attacks from male gamers in other forums.

A Public Archive

Finally, one of the most beneficial aspects of online fandom roleplay is the written nature of the discourse. Unlike many gaming forums, a vast majority of the interactions surrounding fandom roleplay is preserved in public, written formats. Because much of the in-game and paratextual work of roleplay takes place on public, community forums, these interactions are available for research and reference beyond the immediate present, allowing for research focused on shifts in communities or players over time as well as access to materials that are personal, which is an interesting contrast to the kinds of ethnographic materials that may be gathered in more physical spaces where a researcher's very presence may shift an individual's performance. Because materials and interactions may be collected after the fact, participants in a study can consent to release threads that highlight a variety of social contexts.

Conclusion

Current research into gender and gaming has offered some promising insights into how physical contexts and demographics impact the way women participate in gaming. Considering fandom roleplay as a context for study can bridge the gap between existing work on gender and fanfiction and the present, dominating research on female gamers in school settings. It also allows for a different view of an online gaming community than MMOs, where female players are often outnumbered and silenced due to harassment and othering based on their gender.

Also, while this initial overview of the benefits of fandom roleplay is based largely on personal anecdotal evidence, the presence of easily-accessible archives allows for a great deal of flexibility in research possibilities. In a topic where much of the conversation is oversimplified due to the difficulty

created by social stereotyping and spatial limitations, this digital gaming community could add complexity to analysis of how female-gamers navigate their gaming identities in social spaces.

I love fandom roleplay and the community I have built there over the years, and I find it fascinating to see how and where conflicts differ in a female-dominated setting from other, non-gender specific gaming arenas. If we, as researchers, are going to combat our own biases in doing gender-based research, this platform is ideal for seeing a gendered space that is diverse and dynamic and allows for progress in a large number of research questions that others have begun to explore.

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