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"SHOW US YOUR T*TS!!!"¹

As a researcher, I felt I initially approached the idea of sexism in the virtual world of World of Warcraft in an almost totally unbiased way. Granted, I myself had experienced a few instances of sexist behavior, but I went into my procurement of interviewees with what I felt was a total lack of expectations as to what reactions I would receive from the general World of Warcraft public. My forum post stated that I was exploring possible instances of sexism towards female gamers, and using my name in the post clearly identified me as a woman, but the post made no claims as to whether or not I felt sexism even existed at all. However, very quickly I discovered the true feelings of players about the topic I was exploring. Comments such as the one above demonstrated a total lack of regard for the academic nature of my undertaking, and instead focused on trivial and sophomoric comments about my level of education and the personal motives individuals felt were behind my study. Many of the sexist postings on my original thread, in my own opinion as a researcher, justified the need for such an undertaking in the first place.

The world of any Massively Multiplayer Online (MMO) game is often an intimidating one for women. The gaming industry is still viewed as a primarily 'male' environment, and women are thought by many to be out of place and even unwelcome in a MMO game. While the numbers of online gamers who are women are growing significantly, many players feel that the mindset of the industry as a whole has not caught up to the statistics, being that games are still designed and marketed almost entirely to men. Slightly over half of online gamers are women, and 20-30 percent of those gamers that play MMOs are women.²

Literature Review

Overall, it seems very little research has been conducted regarding sexism in video games. There is prior research regarding gender representation in console video games, but this is a significantly different matter, as these games do not focus on the interactions between players, and sexism can really only be experienced through personal interactions. One reason for the lack of research is simply that MMO environments are still relatively new.

The research of T.L. Taylor, looks at what attracts female players to MMOs. Taylor found that "when reasons are given for why women in general use computers it is often framed around how they enjoy communication with others and how new media provide opportunities for these kinds of activities."³ Taylor's study is relevant

¹ One response to my request for participants.

² Taylor, 2003

³ Taylor, 2003

in researching sexism in that it is one of the only studies that deal with women and MMOs.

Helen Kennedy's article looked at the ambivalent feminist reaction to the character of Lara Croft, and explores how the character is used by male players as a form of voyeurism and mastery over the female body in a safe environment. This related to my study and World of Warcraft due to the fact that players of the game can choose to play a character that is different from their own gender.

Sharon Sherman looks at the console game of Super Mario Brothers 2 and explores the transformation of the female character into the hero when the game is played by girls. In Sherman's research, every girl that played the game played as the princess where the boys played as Luigi or Toadstool. This research was similar to my findings, where every single female player interviewed chose a female character as their main character in the game, while male players were split evenly between playing a female character and playing a male character.

David Leonard's article indicated to what extent and in what way the female gender was portrayed in console video games. "64% of characters are male, 19% are nonhuman, and only 17% are female. More specifically, 73% of player-controlled characters are males, with less than 15% female, of which 50% are props or bystanders...Female characters, especially females of color, serve as sexual eye-candy...Twenty percent of female characters expose their breasts, with more than 10% revealing their buttocks."⁴

Other studies on sexism in general were also applicable to my research. Biernat and Kobrynowicz found in their research that "gender stereotypes affect judgments of individuals in an assimilative fashion – men and women are judged consistently with broad gender stereotypes. This pattern is typically seen in research in which nothing or little else is known about a target person besides her or his gender."⁵ Glick and Fiske propose a theory of "ambivalent sexism" that seems to fit what many female players in World of Warcraft have experienced. "Ambivalent sexism proposes dimensions that reflect the ambivalent view of women as likable but incompetent."⁶

Study Design

My study consisted of three main areas of research. I was interested in exploring how often players actually encounter sexism in World of Warcraft. Second, I was interested in determining how often cases of sexism interfere with the normal game play of World of Warcraft players. Finally, I was interested in exploring to what extent players feel that sexism is or is not a valid concern in virtual environments.

My study was a qualitative one, using a random convenience sample made up of willing participants who viewed my request for interviews and responded with an interest in participating. Using such a small, non-random sample, it is not possible to make generalizations on the entire population. The qualitative work of this study is only meant to explore the issue of sexism in the game.

⁴ Leonard, 2003

⁵ Biernat and Kobrynowicz, 1999

⁶ Glick and Fiske, 1999

I posted a request for participants on the World of Warcraft general forum with an email address to contact if interested. Out of all those who responded to the original posting (over 100), 28 were used as actual participants in the study, a number that is, clearly, much lower than the original. There were many who responded to the original posting that were removed from the study due to a variety of reasons. Many were under the age of 18 and were not used because of complicated consent procedures involved with minors. Many were also not serious responses, and were therefore not contacted again for further instructions about participation. Others did not respond a second time to my email to them about setting up a meeting time, or never responded to the list of questions they were sent to answer. Any initial experiences or opinions that these individuals gave in their original email were then eliminated from my overall observations.

The actual interviewing process was extremely informal. Participants were either sent an email with a list of questions to answer or interviewed on AOL Instant Messenger or in private chat within World of Warcraft. In all cases, participants were asked and encouraged to elaborate or discuss anything they felt was relevant to the topic, and discussion was frequently led by the interviewee and their individual experiences. However, in every case the same questions were addressed by those interviewed in one form or another, and answers to each consisted of various degrees of depth.

Results

Twenty-eight people were interviewed. Fourteen were women and 14 were men. This even split of the gender of participants was entirely by accident, but made for very interesting observations in the experiences and choices of the players. Of the 14 male participants, seven had a male character as their main character and seven had a female character as their main character. All 14 of the female participants played female characters as their main character. The majority of those that played their own gender stated that it simply made sense to play a character that matched their true gender. Some of the women stated that they "prefer playing a female just because I like role-playing a strong woman."⁷

Of the male respondents who played female characters, the majority stated that aesthetics went into their decision. One respondent stated that "If I'm going to stare at someone for hours on end, I'd like them to be aesthetically pleasing. I find the female WoW models to be rather attractive, and nicer to view than the male models."⁸

However, there were also male respondents that chose to play female characters for other reasons than the physical appearance. One male who played a female character stated that he did find his character attractive, however chose to play a female due to the fact that he has "always associated more with female characters" due to his personality in real life. He described himself as more of the "sensitive and caring type" who "never really felt the stereotypical 'macho' guy" suited him well.⁹

⁷ Respondent 11, April 7, 2005

⁸ Respondent 2, April 4, 2005

⁹ Respondent 7, April 6, 2005

Of the 28 respondents interviewed, 22, or 78%, had witnessed or experienced their own definition of sexist behavior from other players in the game. Two of these gave ambiguous answers and one stated that sexism had only been witnessed on the message boards. The two respondents that gave ambiguous answers as to whether or not they had witnessed or experienced sexism answered no to the question, followed by a 'but', such as "but I have seen someone called a slut in general chat" and all of these felt that sexist characteristics were present elsewhere in the game in some form. Of the six that had not witnessed or experienced cases of sexism, three were female and three were male. Five out of the six that had not observed sexist behavior found other sexist characteristics in the game. Only one respondent felt that sexism did not exist at all in any aspect of World of Warcraft. This respondent was male, and whose characters were "90% male".¹⁰ It is interesting to note that this person not only felt that female players were not treated any worse, he also did not feel as if they were treated any better. He viewed the environment in World of Warcraft as being totally equal, and that people were treated according to their gaming abilities.

Frequency of experiences of sexism ranged from practically every time a person played, to only once or twice, to never. The majority of sexist experiences people encountered involved random people, or people that they did not spend time with regularly in the game. For example, one male player experienced multiple random experiences with his female character.

"While in the Barrens doing a quest when I was about 20 levels higher than most of the people there, someone much lower in level than me came up to me and said, 'hey Woman, get me some cloth, the GOOOOOD kind.' I never quite figured out when he meant by that, but the fact that he referred to my character as 'woman' when my name was clearly displayed angered me."

Also:

"Another time I was on the Zeppelin to Undercity and while I was waiting in front of the ship another character did an emote with the /me command...and did "[character's name] assfucks [participant]." ¹¹

Cases of sexism using the custom emote command were experienced by multiple players.

"Once I walked into an Inn and had a bunch of guys "/me slaps her ass" and things like that. They followed me around the Inn saying they would like to have sex with me and saying "/me touches her boobies," etc." ¹²

Many of these players who experienced instances of sexism were involved in cases that affected their game play, from the annoyance of having a character following them, to being discriminated against in group settings.

¹⁰ Respondent 10, April 2, 2005

¹¹ Respondent 7, April 6, 2005

¹² Respondent 22, April 27, 2005

"I played a Night Elf female warrior in beta and most of the time people would discreetly not let me do my job. Either 'cause they felt a female warrior wasn't up to par with a male one or because their natural instinct was to stop monsters from attacking a female character. Sometimes they would go as far as saying that they would need a second warrior despite me being a few levels over what was required for the instance we were doing."¹³

Other players expressed concern about the built in emotes in the game, primarily the /dance emote, which also led back to the overall appearance of some of the characters in general.

"The species that are more humanoid seem to have a more 'centerfold' quality, especially the Night Elves. They are quite skanky, right down to the dance."¹⁴

"Especially notable are the Night Elf females (as I'm sure you have been told a hundred times). They have an extremely provocative dance animation and can hardly move without their breasts moving more."¹⁵

When respondents spoke of the depictions of different races of characters, the one most often mentioned was that of the Night Elf female. One respondent in particular was very concerned with the physical depiction of her Night Elf character.

"The female Night Elf dance is a stripper dance. When I first made my character dance, I laughed at her stripper dance and then tried typing /dance again thinking she would do another dance. I was angry when I realized the only way my character could dance was in a sexually enticing manner. How is my character supposed to dance when she is happy and trying not to be sexy? There is no way. Every time my female Night Elf dances, she is being a sex object...My boyfriend plays a [male] Night Elf druid, and his character dances like Michael Jackson. That's fun! Why are the females of the race relegated to being sex objects while the males are fun?"¹⁶

Cases involving sexism from a regular contact of the player, such as friends or other guild member, were less frequent, but still reported. One woman ended up leaving the guild she was involved with due to the sexist behavior of another member.

"When I was level 40 I joined a guild with a bunch of guys I had been leveling with. Eventually, I hit level 60 and they were still in their 40s and early 50s. The GM stopped talking to me when I passed him in levels...and when I hit level 60 it was even worse. He did not like being 'beaten' by a girl and made it known."¹⁷

¹³ Respondent 24, April 27, 2005

¹⁴ Respondent 8, April 7, 2005

¹⁵ Respondent 13, April 10, 2005

¹⁶ Respondent 17, April 17, 2005

¹⁷ Respondent 16, April 17, 2005

It should be noted that this player continues to interact with the other members of the guild, and only received negative behavior from the one individual.

Another female respondent experienced a problem of sexism within her guild.

"Once in my guild chat channel, a male player (who ironically plays all female characters) suggested that women who get pregnant outside of marriage or in their teens should be required to have abortions... None of the male players said a word to him for saying such offensive things in the guild channel, so I had to speak up. The player pulled his character from the guild after I politely asked him to refrain from saying such things. He later rejoined the guild while I was not online. The guild leader, a male player, never corrected the offensive player, and in fact, he was promoted to officer status."¹⁸

Some players felt that the gaming company itself was to blame for the frequent cases of sexism, be it through poor response to reported cases, or from the sexual nature in which many of the characters were designed. Respondent 17, who was concerned about the dance of her Night Elf character, stated that she felt this had to do with the male domination of the gaming industry.

"The game designers could have chosen many other dance styles for the females, but in all races, the female does a dance that is suggestive of some sexual nature. I think this happens because the gaming industry is dominated by male designers...Blizzard is alienating female players."¹⁹

Characteristics that could be controlled by the game developers such as the fact that many pieces of armor appear very skimpy on the female players while they are shown as normal looking armor on males were thought to be sexist by 52% of the respondents.

"The graphic is designed so that when the female Night Elves have been standing stationary for a period of time, the bounce their body so that their breasts bounce...and I have heard male players lauding (in the general channel) the designers' for including the 'tittie bounce'."²⁰

"Of course, there's also the clothing to blame...black mage weave leggings, look at them on a guy, and then on a girl, you will see the difference."²¹

"Strangely though, the robes I wear look different than the robes the male characters wear, even though they may be the same item...many times it's hard to not come off as 'skanky' with the clothing options they give you as a female character, many times it's a

¹⁸ Respondent 17, April 17, 2005

¹⁹ Respondent 17, April 17, 2005

²⁰ Respondent 17, April 17, 2005

²¹ Respondent 1, April 4, 2005

choice of wearing the better gear and looking 'whorish' or sacrificing the gear to look more respectable."²²

Many of the players felt that women gamers were given preferential treatment over other players. In fact, majority of respondents stated that women are given benefits in one form or another, even many of those that experienced regular sexism in the game.

"I feel that the people in my guild protect me more in-game than they do to other people while fighting because they know that I am a girl in real life. I have also had some people in my guild make me armor sets or send my herbs I couldn't find...for free."²³

Other players felt that women were allowed to break the rules and were given higher positions in guild groups earlier based on their gender in real life.

Discussion

Opinions and experiences of cases of sexism within the game were extremely inconsistent. Responses varied from sexism being encountered on an almost daily basis, to no sexist behavior ever having been witnessed. The reason for this discrepancy in experiences is not clear, as it seems if some people witness or receive cases of sexism on a daily basis, then those that claimed never to have witnessed it would have come across it at one point or another in their gaming experience. One reason could just be what an individual person considers the definition of sexism to be. I did not describe to players what they should consider to be sexism, as there is no real definition.

In my opinion, sexism in World of Warcraft can be considered to be excluding players based on their gender, showing favoritism based on gender, or affecting the normal game play of another player through inappropriate actions or comments. However, one person could consider something to be sexist that another person would not, which would therefore influence whether or not they felt they had witnessed sexism.

Another factor for the discrepancy could be the level of involvement that the various players have with other players in the game. Most of the cases of sexism seemed to be from players that the target of the behavior had no personal connection with. Many of the cases were just random individuals making passing sexist remarks. Less sexism was reported in guild environments where players have regular contact with the other individuals. These cases were reported, just not as frequently.

One possible explanation, while no data from my research actually supports this, is that the more people interact with strangers, the more sexist experiences a person has. Many felt that the anonymity provided by the presence of a character influenced some players to do or say things that they would normally not do in real life situations, such as make sexist comments or behave in a sexist way. According to Bartle, "anonymity is itself a neutral concept: you can use it for good or for evil. In practice, someone has to know who you really are, so you can be called into

²² Respondent 7, April 6, 2005

²³ Respondent 25, April 28, 2005

account...In virtual worlds, this will be the administrators; other players don't get proof who you are unless (through your behavior) you give it to them."²⁴ This factor leaves punishment of deviant behavior, such as sexism, up the gaming company themselves, who often have much more important things to worry about. Therefore, the factor of anonymity coupled with little chance of consequence can encourage behavior in a person that would not normally be seen.

In my opinion, cases of sexism from other players cannot be avoided. In any sort of environment involving large groups of people instances of sexism and racism and other social opinions will occur. However, these instances should be dealt with and discouraged, and currently sexism in World of Warcraft is encouraged through the lack of reprimand from other players and managers of the virtual environment, as well as the obvious differences in the genders, such as the appearance of armor. According to Burke, "we are often judged, fabricated and constructed by others based upon nothing but our image, by what people see on the surface."²⁵ When those that play female characters have no choice but to have their characters wear clothing that V's down to their navel, or cannot prevent their characters from jumping up and down and bouncing their breasts, this automatically, however subconsciously, affects the opinions and behaviors of those that interact with those characters. Basically, if the character looks like a slut, they are more likely to be treated as one.

There are a number of weaknesses in my study that should be addressed. The primary weakness is the likelihood of biased opinions that my respondents hold. Due to the way in which I procured participants, individuals were aware of what exactly I was exploring, and therefore more likely to participate if they already held a preexisting opinion on the subject of sexism. This is also most likely why 50% of my respondents were female when only 20-30% of the player base is women.²⁶ Sexism is generally something that women are more concerned about than men, so women are naturally more likely to be drawn to a study such as mine. The data pool was also relatively small, having been procured from only one forum. Another weakness was the ambiguous nature of my topic. Opinions on what is considered sexism and what is not widely vary from person to person, so therefore people experienced various frequencies of what they considered to be sexism.

Conclusion

The majority of players interviewed experienced sexism on a regular basis, and this sexism often interfered with their normal game play, in terms of being followed or harassed for a long period of time, or even in some cases excluded or discriminated against in group settings. Studying sexism in virtual worlds was thought to be relevant in virtual worlds by the majority of those interviewed, if for no other reason than "sexism in any culture or subculture is revealing about the phenomenon itself."²⁷

Traditional and even antiquated gender roles are being reinforced through the prevalently male environment of games. According to Martin, "the consequences of sex segregation are pervasive. Because play in boys' groups is marked by concerns

²⁴ Bartle, 2004

²⁵ Burke, 1996

²⁶ Taylor, 2003

²⁷ Respondent 27, April 11, 2005

with dominance and constriction of interaction whereas play in girls' groups is marked by cooperation and facilitating interaction, girls and boys potentially learn very different styles of interaction in their peer groups."²⁸ World of Warcraft is still primarily a male play group, so therefore male aspects of play are what are facilitated and expected in the game.

While the idea of having anonymity is why many people felt people engaged in sexist behaviors, Castronova suggests that the social relationships of an avatar can have a large affect on the overall enjoyment of the game.²⁹ If certain people develop an online reputation of sexist behavior, it will most certainly affect their social status in the game. Therefore if players expected punishment for sexist behaviors, they would likely not engage in them at all for fear of retribution. As it now stands, the gaming companies that monitor player activity have much more important things to worry about than punishing every player who offends another player in some way. In the future, it will be interesting to explore how developers handle cases of sexism as the gender populations of virtual worlds become more and more equal.

²⁸ Martin, 1999

²⁹ Castronova, 2001

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