

Vic J. "Sociological and Psychological Factors of Play: Reflections of the Character in the Self," June 2005

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Massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs) have attracted hundreds of thousands of online gamers from many different countries all over the world onto gaming servers in which people interact and socialize as though they were sitting in the same room next to each other. Indeed, these virtual spaces make the concept of being in close proximity with someone that may be thousands of miles away a new and exciting realm to explore. Equally exciting are the societies that these MMOGs create and maintain: just imagine sitting in the same (virtual) space as a man from India, a woman from Houston, a boy from the Bronx and twins from Seattle all 'partying' in an online game; the possibilities are only as limited as one's creative imagination and societies' internet connectivity. These MMOGs allow an individual to create characters that can be as similar or as different to their 'real' selves as one could wish; the host of available MMOGs almost inevitably contain human avatars along with a selection of different races that depend greatly on the fantasy setting in which the MMOG is being played out. On top of this racial dynamic lie a choice between different 'class' selections which shape how the user interacts with the game throughout their virtual existence; like choice of race, a character's class choice is almost always unalterable throughout one's avatar's life. The character class which one chooses to play in these online environments inevitably impacts the users' gameplay experience in a number of fundamental ways. One of the most apparent of these ways is the way in which one's chosen class affects one's role in the most necessary aspects of almost every successful MMOG: combat. Combat has been, and is, one of the most fundamental aspects of MMO gaming, and as such, the classes that are individually chosen at the beginning of an experienced player's avatar's life is almost always centered on the role that individual expects to fill in groups, or otherwise, during combat situations. There are 'warrior' class types that have the fundamental job of entering the fray with their combat weapons drawn; hacking and slashing away at the enemy until they are adequately flailed is a major part of these characters' virtual every-day lives. Another class that is almost unanimously represented in these online environments is the 'healer' class. The healer class' job functions basically as a support role; healers aren't ever supposed to be the lead combatant during a conflict (at least while grouping) and the healer's job basically boils down to keeping the other group members, such as the warriors, in healthy and prime fighting condition. Considering the extreme polarity of the functions each of these roles, there must be some projection of the (future) self which takes place when deciding to become either of these roles; perhaps there is a connection between one's social perception of the self and the character class that one chooses to play, perhaps there is a gender bias towards certain roles that one chooses to fill...

Massively populated virtual online environments – such as MMOGs like Everquest 2 (EQ2) and World of Warcraft (WOW) – are not only fun places to play, but are also useful as tools to engage in the discourse of social psychology (Blascovich). Gender research amongst gaming in general and specifically in MMOGs is not a new subject of interest by any means, and has been the subject of many researchers' work within online environments; Women and Men tend to treat each other differently in games, be motivated by different reasons, and discover MMOGs in different ways (Ballard & Lineberger, 1999;

Cassell & Jenkins, 1999; Taylor, 2003; Yee, 2005). The differences in MMOG player gender – typically biased in favor of the overwhelming male majority – even reflect in the real-world economic market of MMOG characters in which male avatars fetch loftier prices than females of the same level (Castronova). Nick Yee has conducted a great deal of research of paramount importance relating to massively multiplayer online gaming and its players. His work that delineates the motivational factors of online gamers had a marked influence on the structure and design of this research project. Yee divided the motivations to play online games based on his play-time and research experience with Everquest and Richard Bartle's classification of player-types, which he ultimately refined into five distinct motivations: Achievement, Escapism, Relationship, Immersion, and Manipulation (2004). In reference to gender differentiation amongst the motivations, Yee states "male users are more likely to engage in these environments to achieve objective goals, whereas female users are more likely to engage in MMORPGs to form relationships and become immersed in a fantasy environment" (Yee, 2004). This motivational difference could point to a tangible link between gender and class choice which deserves further exploration.

T.L. Taylor also addresses gender differences in play in her article "Multiple Pleasures: Women and Online Gaming," in which she discusses the different reasons why female gamers play and the different strengths that women possess in MMOGs. While possessing good hand-eye coordination, maintaining a level head during combat, and being able to hold one's concentration for long periods of time are all typical good characteristics to look for in a good gamer, Taylor points out that "chatting, connecting with other people, forming relationships and maintaining them are all aspects of the interpersonal pleasure MMORPGs afford and multiuser games have benefited by drawing in this component of online life" (Taylor, 2003). Some stereotypical female traits are known strengths in these online environments. Taylor provides a nice quote in this regard, stating that

as many EQ players remark, the high-end game is one in which group participation is key to success and social adeptness can help players become recognized and valued members of the community. In this regard, skills typically marked as feminine (social connection, group facilitation, and good communication) can be seen to fit well with the social organization of the game. Rather than just seeing community participation as simply involving chatting, it speaks to a range of skills and women are certainly involved in this aspect of MMORPG life. (Taylor, 2003)

Thus, while women remain underrepresented in MMOGs, their typical skill-sets allow those who do play to become very effective MMOG players, especially towards the higher levels of the game that require large amounts of social organization and reward those who can communicate amongst groups of people effectively. This way, in which skills that are stereotypically witnessed in females are rewarded in advanced stages of the game may point to a motivational influence for female players and be a continual factor in their on-going participation in these environments. Much in the same way, this may also influence the class that a female player chooses in response to the desire to play a community- or group-based role that facilitates the use of these particular skills.

The research question that this study attempts to address is 'what psychological, gender, or other contextual factors are related to which class is experimented with and ultimately chosen to be played by MMO gamers?' Qualitative methods, including an open-ended and closed-ended question survey, in-depth interviews (face-to-face in real life, in a chat program mIRC, using AOL Instant Messenger, in World of Warcraft as well as in Everquest 2) and observations were used to put together a workable data-set from which to

delineate the results. The survey was distributed via email and through a chat program called mIRC. This Internet Relay Chat (IRC or mIRC) provided a useful forum to enter into dialogue with many players outside of the game, whether they were at work or otherwise not playing the game and instead participating in this chat-friendly environment. IRC, as well as AOL Instant Messenger, were also used as a platform to conduct several of the interviews that weren't conducted from within the games' virtual space. Overall, seventeen individuals agreed to take the survey that included questions concerning gender, number of hours played, number of characters played along with supplemental data concerning the character class that is primarily played along with secondary character class. Social-contextual data was also gathered including questions on the marital status of the individual, whether or not the individual has or has had children, educational status, and employment status. Since the relevant literary data seemed to suggest that female players tend to be motivated more by relationships in the game rather than achievement, the classes that were examined by this study both mostly require grouping – therefore agreeing with the relationship motivation – throughout their character's life in order to effectively advance. Along the same lines, since the warrior's effectiveness is typically reflective of the quality of the items that he or she has equipped, at least much more so in relation to a typical healer's effectiveness, this juxtaposition provided a nice dichotomy in this respect by which to analyze the differences in character class – and thus group role – selection.

The sample that this research drew on was constructed of individuals that were both a product of the participant's convenience and their willingness to express themselves. The participants consented to both an eight-question long, lengthy open-ended interview, as well as the idea that the information that they provided would be used in an attempt to assess their choice of character class, and thus group role, in a socio-psychological manner. As a result, most of the sample consisted of people that had previously at least been acquainted with me, and five of the nine participants have both known and trusted me personally for a period of over a year. That being said, the participants were all urged to answer as honestly as possible and the hypothesis of the research was neither foreshadowed nor shared with the participants prior to the interview and survey completion. Therefore, while participants knew, consented to, and sometimes offered opinionated statements in regards of the general aim of the research in which they participated, they had neither: knowledge of the project's specific aims nor any of the other respondent's assertions before they answered.

As previously mentioned, all participants were given informed consent to participating in the research prior to both taking the survey and taking some time to complete an interview. There were a couple of informal chat conversations in which some of my long-time friends participated in IRC that I thought were pertinent to my research, and so I obtained consent from each of the participants in those conversations after-the-fact. For the four participants that I had little to no previous acquaintance with, their interest was a product of group experience that I shared with them, during which I identified myself as being a researcher and they subsequently contacted me on their own terms via email about participating. The age of participants in the interview portion of the study ranged from 18 to 29 with the majority of the participants falling within the range of 20-26 years old.

Of the several interesting topics that emerged during the discourse with participants, the most interesting was likely the overriding feeling from both classes that their particular class (coming from both Warriors and Priests/Clerics) that their own class is the most important class in the group. The warriors all mentioned the importance of having a good 'tank' or "meat-shield". All of the clerics mentioned, to some degree, how "priests have always been the most important components of groups" (Male, 22). Although there were

only 2 female participants in the interview portion of the study, they were very descriptive of the importance of their role in a group. The female warrior stated that she likes “the thrill of being in the fray, a good group always needs a good tank and you know how good [I am] at tanking” (18). The female healer stated “I’m the one that keeps everyone alive, that makes me the most important group member, right?” (22). Another interesting theme that emerged during the course of the interviews was the common observation that participants didn’t seem to observe many females at all playing warrior classes; when the female participant was asked about her lack of warrior peers, she said “I see it too, I guess other girls just aren’t cut out for it [...] I mean hack-n-slash, that’s such a typical boy game front. Maybe I’m just weird, but I like the fact that I’m a woman and I carry a big sword, it’s the intimidation factor [...along with other things]” (18). Yet another theme of interest emerged in response to the question regarding the reason participants chose to play the class type that they currently play. Examples of responses include: “They’re in the center of all the action and usually one of the leaders [of the group/raid]” (Male Warrior, 26), and “I really like the way Priests are indispensable as far as groups are concerned. Priests don’t only get badass offensive spells, but their buffs and heals make them the most valuable component of any group” (Male Cleric, 21).

The analysis of responses to various questions asked during the interviews and subsequent to several in-depth conversations with individuals that I have personally known and gamed with for a number of years led to the emergence of several noticeable and noteworthy patterns. First of all, every participant interviewed commented on the appeal of grouping, absolutely everyone mentioned grouping being an important part of their character’s life and enjoy playing with smaller or larger groups of people as a primary method of advancing their characters. Second, the theme of protector came up amongst almost all of the participants; in warriors, it emerged in the form of the description of their role as being the “meat shield” whereas amongst the healer classes this theme surfaced in statements in the form of “keeping the group alive”. Thirdly, most participants of both warrior and healer class-type referenced, either directly or indirectly, the action that their class-type was involved in during group combat as one of the appeals of playing the class that they chose. The warriors’ (more so than the healers) references came in the form of being ‘in the fray’ or directly mentioned the greater sense of “action that comes with being a warrior” (Male Warrior, 22), while the healers sense of action seemed to spur more from the sense of hectic healing, trying to keep their group-mates alive during large battles. Finally, the warrior class seemed to attune more to the interest of achiever-oriented individuals. For instance, one warrior commented that the competition aspect of the game made the game fun for him, elaborating that he was always the “main tank” (26) in raids, the best equipped, the most skillful, and the first player to reach the top levels of any game that he played. This is also backed up by some comments made by a healer who would play a warrior or rogue if forced to change classes because of “the importance of items for those two character classes. Makes the game retain some fun at maximum level when you can continue to upgrade your class (noticeably) via items. That’s one of the flaws of cleric/priest characters in that the item upgrades have minimal effects” (22). Thus described, the healer class loses some appeal in the eyes of players motivated by achievement, at least at the highest end of the game, because items obtained within the virtual environment have less of an effect on the performance of the character in comparison with character-classes such as the warrior.

The answers that were provided to my survey and interview questions point to some useful trends that have assisted me in answering the question that brought about the initial design of this project. First of all, the results infer that one’s personal ‘relationship motivational factor’, as described by Yee, seems to be of paramount importance in the choice of which character class is ultimately played in a MMOG. All of the participants

expressed an interest if not a definite preference in grouping with other players, and many of the healers even specifically mentioned choosing the healer class because of their constant demand in groups. Secondly, the warrior class seems to be more catered to the achievement motivation due to its long-term upgradeability, in the form of levels and items that confer power and substantial increase in effectiveness as compared to healer classes. Also, a substantial sense of 'action' is witnessed in both warriors and healers, although it was referred to in a more positive sense amongst warriors, and more as a hectic aspect of group play that healers were forced to deal with on their side. The correlation this sense of 'action' may have with the choice of character class is unknown.

While I know, and have known for some time, the 18 year old female warrior player that I included in the study in order to keep some sort of accurate gender representation, she and others (including myself) have noted the relative lack of real-life females playing the warrior/pure combat class in MMOGs. When I posed a follow-up question pertaining to why the participants believed these assertions made by multiple individuals was true, the answers varied widely. The 18 year old female responded that warriors were "too point-and-click for most girls" while others had a wide range of responses including the more chauvinistic – "girls don't have the leadership skills to be a warrior" (Male Warrior, 26) – to the more civil – "I think women are impressed more by the spellcasting classes, maybe it's an aesthetic appeal" (Male Cleric, 22). While neither any responses that I received nor the sample size of my research can backup my assertion here, I would hypothesize that the warrior class is too achievement oriented – the success of the warrior dependant so much on the quality of the items adorned by him/her – to be held in high esteem by most women; this assertion would certainly require more research to be proven to any degree of certainty.

The methodological limitations of this relatively brief research endeavor are not hard to spot and are fairly great in importance. First of all, the sample size was far too small to make any statements with conclusive authenticity. While 17 participants' data were gathered in the initial phase of research, only 9 of these participants were interviewed due to the scope of my research which called for the examination of only warrior- and healer-type classes to be interviewed. The original ideal goal for this research was to identify and interview 10 members of both the warrior class and healer-type classes, but this goal was not even close to being met. This is due to both the limitation in time that was allotted to conduct the study as well as a general reluctance witnessed in the gaming community to be researched in the manner that I was proposing, as well as my apparent lack of credentials to backup my position as a researcher. It would definitely be useful to also interview members of classes (especially female members) that play classes that are more suitable for solo, as opposed to group, play in order to check for contrasts in the instances of achievement factor and sense of 'action' experienced by these class-type players. Also, it almost goes without saying that my meager sample of females (3 total, 2 of which were included in the more substantive interview portion) was definitely lacking in terms of representation.

Although several answers are offered as a plausible answer to the research question that was set out to be answered by this research, limitations caused by the extremely small sample size of the represented classes and the complete lack of representation of many other class-types that are present in most MMOGs (e.g. the 'solo' classes) severely hinder the conclusiveness of this research. While research, as witnessed in examples by those like Nick Yee, continue to point out that there are solid differences in gender motivational factors of play (2005), gender cannot remain the sole reason by which to examine different motivations. That being said, gender motivations of play along with socio-psychological and other social contextual motivations of play certainly deserve closer investigation by future

research in order to more accurately determine true motivations for playing certain classes as well as determining the cause of the inequality in gender distribution amongst classes.

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