

Role-Play in MMOs: How avatar characteristics affect the game play experience

Katherine Rector
Trinity University, San Antonio, TX*

Abstract

This paper looks at Massively Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Games (MMO), specifically at the role-play experience within them with an intended focus on avatar characteristics and their impact on the role-play experience. While there are many existing academic research works on both the subject of role-play and on MMOs, there is certainly plenty of room for more research, as role-play is a diverse subject and role-players are an equally diverse group of individuals. Additionally, while there is significant thought given recently to avatar rights, there is little thought given on the subject of avatar characteristics much less on how this aspect of the game affects the players' collective experiences in the game world. Through email interviews with participants gathered from forum recruitment, the author attempted to combine these two concepts in research to discern what trends, if any, might describe the function avatar characteristics perform in the overall role-play experience.

Overview

Originally I was intending to research player assumptions about character appearance impact, specifically the assumptions players consciously have about male and female avatars because I felt this type of research is important in finding out more about how players play the game and what they are looking for in the game. As I got further into the research process my question changed to 'Do players believe there is a significant impact on the role-play aspects of game play based on avatar characteristics?'

Knowledge of player opinions and mindset is beneficial not only for the producers of games, but also for the players themselves. I feel that play is enhanced by knowing about the mindset of other players within the game structure, because then players can more easily find others who share their values of enjoyment and opinions of the game world. Research into assumptions based on avatar characteristics is just one facet of this understanding, but a facet that I feel is important to facilitate greater understanding and enjoyment for all involved.

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My research looked at the role-play aspect of MMO game play and the ways that avatar characteristics may or may not impact it, since there was the potential that I would find that there was no noticeable correlation. By 'avatar characteristics', I mean dimensions of the avatar such as gender, race, class, and stats, as well as any other aspects that participants feel is equally pertinent to the experience.

Literature Review

Role-playing

The topic of what role-playing entails has been the subject of much research, debate, and speculation by the curious. Some definitions look at the actions and behaviors of the individual and other definitions focus instead on the efforts of the group. Some definitions stress the internalized process of role-playing, while others put importance on the results and outward behaviors associated with role-playing. It seems the only true consensus is the agreement to disagree (Dunn, 2005).

However, this is not to say that there is a lack of guidelines in attempting to understand this activity, merely that there are many ways to approach the topic. To look at it through a historical standpoint, the legacy of contemporary role-playing traces back to the war games that have existed in some form throughout most of recorded human history. Over time these evolved into the war games that can be seen now. Role-playing similar to what is known now broke off from war games when the element of fantasy was added, purportedly in 1970 or 1971. From here these aspects slowly brought fantasy role-play gaming genre into existence, as first seen widespread through *Dungeons & Dragons*. From this point other games followed as parodies, spin-offs, or inspired games. Through a combination of game concept, fan base, marketing, and sheer luck, some of these games flourished while others became forgotten (Fine, 1983; Mackay, 2001). The latest twist to the role-playing genre has been in introduction of computerized role-play, particularly through MMOs such as *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft* (Schiesel, 2006). Other forms, such as live-action role-play and the related renaissance fair performances as well as role-play through chat formats, are not easily placed into the chronology (Dunn, 2005).

Another way to approach the topic of role-play is to look to the dominating elemental ideologies of the field of research. For role-playing to exist there must be at least the player, the character, and the situation framework. Different views of role-playing argue the necessity of other factors, but these three are agreed to be the core ingredients. Generally there is some type of audience as well, but this is arguably part of the core three elements as the audience can be people outside the role-play scenario or other players and characters. The player is crucial as not only the physical body in the scenario, but the sentient force behind the character. The character in turn is the fictionalized body participating in the scenario and giving action to the player's thoughts and decisions. The framework of the scenario is the most mutable of the three elements, containing both the reality of the player and the overlapping reality of the character semi-blended into a disjointed experience (Fine, 1983; Mackay, 2001).

Naturally there are multitudes of other directions that researchers can and have used to examine and explain the phenomenon of role-play, as well as an equally high number of sources of research that could be discussed on this topic. However, the historical and elemental ideological frameworks are the two most easily summarized cohesively.

Real world stereotyping: Gender

Because I was expecting to find at least some evidence of stereotyping within the responses from my research participants, I looked into research on it. Stereotypes take many forms and are the subject of countless bodies of research. Gender stereotypes in particular on an extensive subject of research. Sellnow and Treinen's work on gender as it relates to perceived competency remarks on several startling facts. The aspect that is the most relevant deals with the written word, most notably that texts are viewed more favorably when they are believed to have been written by a male. The implication to this is that male characters might benefit from this stereotype, regardless of if the player is male or female. This aspect ties into research about language patterns, "A general process model of the gender-linked language effect: Antecedents for and consequences of language used by men and women". Beneath the highly academic language is the simple truth that is deeply ingrained by society: men should act like men, women should act like women, and there are dire consequences if the expectations of gender are not met. This issue in the virtual world quickly becomes more complicated, not less.

Rapoo's work on gender differences in the naming practices in the Setswana language at first glance seems to have little to do with video games. However, the article reveals many gendered assumptions in both the Setswana community and indirectly in the larger world-wide community. Names merely reflect the structure that in this case is highly divided. While the virtual world is not so clearly divided, it is still important to keep in mind the influences the real world has on how the players interpret it. The biggest insight to take away from this article is that people are highly influenced by how they are perceived by others, which in turn further influences how they are perceived. This is analogous to the players who intentionally play up the stereotypical behavior of the gender they are representing in-game, furthering the cycle of gender perceptions.

"Embedded Gender Expectations: A Covariate Analysis of Conflict Situations and Issues", as the title suggests, goes into how males and females typically react to conflict situations. The stereotype is "that males use competitive or controlling strategies" while females use compromising strategies (Gayle, Allen, and Preiss 380). This reflects a difference in typical socialization by gender and the gender assumptions this is based on. As the authors stress, stereotypes are employed even when they are vastly inaccurate, to the extent that social factors attempt to push certain behaviors onto genders even when there is no logical reasoning behind them. Indeed, it is often received as mildly deviant for a male to portray feminine behaviors or a female portray masculine behaviors in the real world. In the structure of the game, this stereotype is both supported and opposed. It is opposed in that there is no reason why male characters would have to only use stereotypical masculine behaviors and females use only feminine behaviors, and certainly no reason why players must conform to these social expectations. On the other hand, however, the stereotype is supported heavily

by players intentionally emphasizing stereotypical behaviors in efforts to make the character more believable as a specific gender.

Avatar characteristics and importance

In the virtual realm, the avatar is the visual signifier for the player. First and lasting impressions are made on the basis of this representation. Because of this, many people place high significance on the traits that their avatar displays to the general online public. Using them, we are enabled to meet people and engage in activities that our real world identities either would have difficulty with or outright cannot. As opposed to being static beings, avatars instead are highly dynamic entities while they are in use by the player. They do not act independently, but rather “we write identity through them” (Webb, 2001, 562).

In theory, an avatar can be whatever and whoever the player wants it to be. Most avatars have more similarities than differences in practice though. Generally avatars are humanoid in appearance, more or less so depending on the situation and player preferences. They also have names, which have varying levels of uniqueness depending on the system structure and serve as a level of separation between the player and the character. They have both fixed characteristics, such as name and physical appearance, and changeable characteristics, such as intelligence and strength on the virtual playing field (Klang, 2004; Webb, 2001).

Despite the randomization of characteristic assignment in many cases, it is not uncommon at all for players to develop a strong emotional attachment to an avatar, particularly one that they use for a long period of time. This is heightened by the fact that in many games, characters can gain property and prestige over time. Players can also purchase property for their avatar through specific venues. Additionally, players are also often prone to becoming fiercely protective of their avatar identity, to the point of causing legal battles over ownership of this virtual property. Many articles have been written on the rights that avatars should be given, as well as the rights they already have as virtual beings (Donghun, Shearman, & Seung, 2003; Klang, 2004).

Study Design

I wanted to know, ‘Do players believe there is a significant impact on the role-play aspects of game play based on avatar characteristics?’ To find out, I conducted several email interviews with individuals who indicated that they had an interest in role-playing in MMO environments.

I gathered potential participants through having my recruitment message posted to several forums (see Appendix 1 for recruitment message). This was either the regular message or a variation in some cases, the most notable variations being the messages about all of the class projects posted to the Everquest 2 and World of Warcraft forums. The first set of messages I had posted were to forums aimed to gamers in general, while the second set of messages posted were to forums aimed at role-players in specific (see Appendix 2 for list of forums). There were a few additional forums I attempted to post to which are not listed due to my recruitment message being removed before it could generate any attention. The forums that participants reported as leading them to my study were the official Everquest 2 forums, the official

World of Warcraft forums, and the OGame forums. Interview participants were then chosen from the emails I received. The emails that were not coherent or came from people taking the study as a joke were ignored. Emails that showed a strong interest in role-play were generally given higher precedence in sending out the first set of questions. After the first set of answers were sent in, I modified which questions were sent out next as time allowed as well as modified my question list to reflect issues brought up that I felt were valid to my overall study question. Unfortunately, this led to having more questions than could be realistically asked to all of the participants within the limited timeframe, and many of the questions only being answered by one or two participants. Because of this, my findings are not easily comparable between participants.

I feel it is necessary to admit that I made many mistakes during the planning stages of my data collection. Originally I intended to conduct my interviews through instant messaging, because I mistakenly thought this would be a mutually convenient method. However, as I quickly learned, most of the individuals who contacted me as potential interviewees during my first wave of recruitment preferred to conduct interview through email or in-game. Those who indicated a willingness to be interviewed by instant messaging were extremely difficult to reach, and eventually I decided to be swayed by the popular preference of the interviewees. Due to the fact that I still feel awkward trying to conduct interviews in-game while doing other activities, I chose to conduct the interviews through emails. The second wave of recruitment showed a similar lean towards email and in-game interviews over instant messaging interviews, so I did not bother trying to set up instant messaging appointments and instead went straight to email interviews.

Email interviewing brought its own set of problems that I was not anticipating. For one, I was not anticipating having so many technical problems with the email system, which resulted in emails not always being sent out on the first try. Beyond that were the problems with the interview structure itself that I was not expecting. I sent out individualized emails containing a few questions at a time rather than sending the entire question list or setting up an online survey to direct participant to because I wanted to be able to customize my questioning to individual replies, as well as because I personally find long surveys to be annoyingly time-consuming and difficult to concentrate on and assumed that some participants would feel similarly. This led to a high number of participants who either stopped responding to emailed questions during the interview process (particularly in the first round of recruiting) or who did not ever receive the later questions due to time issues (particularly in the second round). I transcribe the email interviews by copying the email text from interviewees into a separate document. Participant comments were mostly left as is instead of editing for readability because I did not feel there was a significant need since the responses were already generally well-written, hopefully due in part to my efforts to screen out potential participants who did not seem as likely to give coherent responses. The only editing done was removing identifying information, such as character or player names, and of course editing quotes used for context.

Results and discussion

Overwhelmingly, the interviewees indicated that they felt there was a significant impact, particularly in regards to characteristics that they felt made them able to better

identify with their avatar. However, there was no clear agreement as to what characteristics facilitated this. This lack of agreement surprised me, as I had expected there to be trends of player opinions even though I did not have any predictions of what those trends might be. Due to this lack of agreement across my participant responses, my findings tell more about role-play in general than about avatar characteristics.

Some interview participants had vast experience with role-playing outside of MMOs, while others had never encountered role-playing before they started playing. This difference in outside experience did not seem to affect how they regarded their avatar, nor did it seem to affect their level of enjoyment of the role-play experience. The only characteristic my participants seemed to share was that they considered themselves role-players in some way, though they did not have one overarching definition of what role-playing consisted of. Most of them role-play within the game structure, though this was not the case for all. As explained by one participant:

Role-play in MMO's I have found leaves much to be desired. Players often metagame to an extreme, casting both their and your character into cookie cutter roles based on race/class combinations. And I've found that quite often, if you try to be creative and make a character that stands out from the crowd, you will be snubbed by the RP community for daring to be original. Thus, I dont role-play in MMO's anymore. Maybe some day I will find a good RP community that encourages originality and creativity, but until then I will just enjoy my game without getting fussed over by "l33t RPer's", as I call them. - **Participant D**

Other participants also noticed this downside to role-play in MMOs:

Some days I could run screaming from the keyboard because I am being "god-modded" by another roleplayer. - **Participant C**

Though obviously this player did not literally leave the keyboard, nor had the reaction of leaving role-play and MMOs play separate, the observation has a significant impact on the role-play environment. Some participants talked about the 'right vs wrong' way to role-play, while others felt this distinction was overrated and generally unneeded in the role-play community.

I think RP in general could do with a little more creativity these days and less bickering over 'right' and 'wrong' ways." - **Participant I**

And still other participants did not see this distinction at all.

I seen how everyone was having fun with it and that you can't really go wrong with rp because there is no set guideline for how you rp." - **Participant K**

Moving on from the overall attitudes, the divergent degrees of involvement of participants in the virtual world are also observable as well. Some are leaders of role-playing groups, others are only casual role-players, while others (as stated above) have become frustrated with the in-game attitudes and moved out of role-playing in-game.

Interview participants had varying attitudes about subjects such as levels of real world involvement as well. Some players strongly identify with their avatar persona

even out of the game, going so far as to sign their avatar's name and rank in addition to (or occasionally instead of) their own name. Other players emphasize the difference between them and their avatars, stressing during interviews that they are not their avatar. These individuals tended to express great displeasure when other players treat avatars and players as equivalent. Just a few of the expressed opinions:

I am NOT my toon... and nothing gets on my nerves faster than someone who acts/reacts to me in OOC (out of character) as they would in IC (in character). I despise OOC and avoid it, as most of my role play is "open" and unscripted. - **Participant J**

The characters should be wholly made. To me, they are living and breathing, if only in the imagination of the creator. As such, there should be a boundary between the character and the creator. I find too often people play their character as omniscient - the creator giving knowledge to the creation even though nothing in the play of events would suggest the creation would have said knowledge. - **Participant H**

[A]lthough I exaggerate the particular ideals and characteristics of my character, Jiliana, in the game, for me, there is at least a LITTLE bit of the character rooted in the real me. It's hard too, to differentiate sometimes when emotions get in the way. And I have to pull myself back sometimes and remember (for example) 'Wait, I learned about that assassination plot OOC not IC, so I can't let [my character] react in the way I [the player] want to react.' - **Participant C**

Player activities in-game also varied as much as attitudes did. Some players reported focusing on certain achievement activities while acting in-character, though surprisingly these were not always the same activities. For example, some participants reported that they enjoyed crafting while others did not.

NOT a crafter! <shudders> Just not my sort of thing. Nor does it fit with the character I've developed. - **Participant C**

So, from this I see that crafting achievement potential is not a particularly important avatar aspect for all players. Some participants seemed to place more importance on game lore, although:

Some people have become so hardcore about the Lore and following it to the exact point that they forget to be creative as well, and create Lore of their own within a story. - Participant I

Others said that they focused on the social aspects of the game through their character.

My opinion of it now is that it's a nice way to keep the game from seeming like a "Second job" in that you can kill time just being IC (in character), or spice up otherwise mundane conversation with character quirks, accents, lore, and whatnot...instead of discussing Madden Football 2000-something. It's more fun to make friends when you're RPing. - **Participant A**

I'm first and foremost a roleplayer and a "social" player. Tearing through levels, reaching the endgame, raiding, all have little appeal to me. - **Participant B**

On the other hand were participants who reported interests besides socializing:

I go after the high end content as I have the time but it doesn't happen as often as I'd like it to. - **Participant K**

I want to see everything a game has to offer me, I want to be the best I can be at my chosen class, and I want to face and defeat challenging encounters... [but] I hate level grinding, named camping, trade-skilling and the like. - **Participant D**

However, since this is not always the case, apparently this is not the defining aspect that makes an avatar useful for role-playing. Many other potential trends could be looking into, including many that did not even appear within my research. However, this does not change the fact that no single factor seemed to do more than superficially partially explain the impact of avatar characteristics on the role-play experience.

Conclusion

From the limited research I did, the only real conclusion I can reach is that player opinions on what avatar aspects are important are as varied as the players themselves. For some appearances are important. For others, abilities are the more important factor. These abilities may be fighting skills, crafting skills, or other less easily definable skill groups. For still others, the primary appeal of an avatar as a role-play vehicle has less to do with the avatar itself and more to do with the social standing.

I feel that further research into this topic is advisable for many reasons. Foremost because I feel that role-play, especially the affect avatar characteristics have on the experience, is an important subject to learn more about. Secondly I feel that more research should be done because I feel that I got myself far over my head with this, and this question deserves a much more in-depth course of research than I was able to give it during this semester. I would be very interested to see if further investigation would reveal more divisions of thought in the role-play community in MMOs, or if more research would find the aspects to tie them together into a more cohesive population.

Appendix 1. Sample recruitment message

Hello,

My name is Katherine, and I am an undergraduate enrolled in a course on virtual worlds at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. Our class has been playing Everquest II for the past four months, with characters ranging in level from 10 to 27. Our primary characters are members of the guild The Vindicators on the Antonia Bayle server.

As part of an ongoing research project, I would like to speak with people over the age of 18 about their thoughts on how avatar characteristics in MMOs affects gameplay, especially in regards to role-playing. (Note that this is about what players think, not about official statistics about players.)

These interviews could take place via e-mail, in-game, or over an anonymous instant messaging connection. I will preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of all participants.

If you are willing to be interviewed about your thoughts on this topic, please contact me at: ammicko@hotmail.com

I understand that the gaming community is bombarded with survey requests that never lead anywhere. This request is different. Our class is committed to sharing its research findings. At the end of the semester, all student papers and presentations will be linked to the course web site and made available to anyone with an Internet connection.

For more details about our course and the research project, visit:

<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/worlds/faq.html>

Thanks in advance for your time.

Katherine

Appendix 2. Forums Recruited From:

- Official Everquest II Forums
 - Non-Game Play Forum
 - Everquest II Antonia Bayle RP Forum
 - Everquest II Lucan DLere RP Forum
- Official WoW Forums
 - Non-Game Play Forum
 - Role-Play Forum
- OGaming Forums
 - Everquest II Forum
 - Vanguard Forum
 - Paragon City Forum
- GameSpot Forums
- WomenGamers.com Forums
- MMORPG.com (off-topic section)
- RPG Consortium
- RPG Forums Online

Appendix 3. Interview questions

- What video games (MMO or non) do you frequently play?
- How long have you been playing these?
- How many hours per week do you typically play?
- How many avatars do you have?
- How many of these avatars do you play on a regular basis?
- What sort of gamer would you consider yourself?
- What is your perception of role-play in general?
- How did you first come across the concept of role-play?
- What was your opinion of it then, and has your opinion changed since?
- What stereotypes of role-players do you feel there are?
- Is there any basis to these stereotypes?
- What do you feel is the biggest misconception about role-playing?
- What stereotypes have you personally experience, as opposed to just hearing about?
- Do you feel that these stereotypes affect how others treat you in-game?
- How active in the role-playing community would you say that you are?
- Do you typically role-play solo or in a group setting?
- Do you typically role-play with friends, acquaintances, or strangers?
- Have you met many new people through role-playing?
- Have you made new friends through role-play?
- How often do you role-play when you play? Always, sometimes, occasionally?
- What sort of characters are you usually drawn to? Any particular reason?
- Are there any types you rarely or never play? Any particular reason?

- Are there certain character aspects that you find make a character easier to role-play?
- Are these necessarily the same aspects that make a character rewarding to play?
- How did you choose your main avatar's characteristics?
- Was this similar or different from how you choose your other avatars' characteristics?
- Do you think it is easier to role-play a character of the same or opposite gender? Any particular reason?
- What do you feel is your main avatar's biggest strength?
- What (if anything) is your main avatar's biggest weakness?
- How important to you is your personal connection to your avatar?
- How personally involved in your avatar's path through the game would you say you are?
- How involved are you in developing your avatar's back story?
- In what ways is your avatar similar to you?
- In what ways is your avatar significantly different from you?
- Do you feel that character stereotypes significantly impact how others treat you in-game?
- How much thought do you give to the players behind other avatars?
- How much thought do you feel other players give to you as the person behind your avatar?

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