
Gendered Identities at Play

Case Studies of Two Women Playing Morrowind

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This article explores issues of gender and video gaming, typically perceived as a masculine practice, through case studies of two adult women gamers. Drawing on a conception of identities in practice, the analyses show that dominant assumptions about women's preferences and orientations toward video gaming do not reflect the diverse ways that women might make meaning of, respond to, and take pleasure in such games. To better understand women's and men's orientations toward gaming, the article argues for the need to take into account the complexity of people's identities, not just gender alone but its interplay with and enactment in combination with personal histories and cultural factors that play out differently in individuals' lives. This understanding, in turn, leads to insights into how video games may serve as spaces for the enactment of new forms of gendered identities.

Keywords: *gender; identity; women; role-playing*

The apparent “gender divide” in video gaming has caught the attention of both the gaming industry and educators, generating considerable and conflicting perspectives on its causes and consequences and strategies to address it. Although video gaming has grown immensely as an industry during the past decade, with growing numbers of gamers around the globe, including women, gaming continues to be a very gendered practice. Girls and women tend to play different kinds of games than boys and men; for example, women play more “casual” games such as Tetris and Solitaire or games such as *The Sims* (Angelo, 2004; Krotoski, 2004).

The gaming industry obviously has a vested interest (profit) in attracting more gamers, and women have seemed a likely market for quite some time. From the perspective of educators, there are other reasons for giving attention to the gender divide in gaming. Video gaming is now often children's first and most compelling introduction to digital technologies and is presumed to be a door to a broader range of digital tools and applications. Gaming might help develop confidence and skills in using digital technologies, leading to an increased interest and aptitude for careers in computer science and other fields that heavily rely on such technologies. Women's and men's preferences and aptitudes for different kinds of games might also have implications for the design and use of instructional technologies that appeal to both sexes. These possibilities have led to a flurry of research and speculation on girls' and women's attitudes toward games,

self-identified preferences, and gaming strategies. The result has been the development of “girl games,” a host of rather broad assertions about differences between girls and boys as gamers and a considerable amount of ongoing disagreement about the value of both (e.g., Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Wright, n.d.).

In this article, I argue that dominant assumptions about women’s preferences and orientations toward video gaming do not reflect the diverse ways that women might make meaning of, respond to, and take pleasure in such games. These assumptions tend to be based on limited conceptions of the nature of gender and its manifestation in people’s behaviors and self-perceptions. A further limitation of existing work on women and gaming is the tendency to isolate gender from other aspects of players’ identities. To better understand women’s—and men’s—orientations toward gaming, we need to take into account the complexity of people’s identities, not just gender alone, but its interplay with and enactment in combination with personal histories and cultural factors that play out differently in individual’s lives. I will use case studies of two young adult women learning to play the same video game to illustrate how gendered identities are significant yet enacted in different ways through their game play.

The game is *Morrowind: Elder Scrolls*, a best-selling title that is quite open-ended and incorporates many elements that have been considered to be cutting edge by both the video game industry experts and educators interested in the learning potential of video gaming. Because of its open-endedness and accommodation of a wide variety of potential gaming styles, *Morrowind* offers a particularly useful context for exploring how gender, as it intersects with other aspects of players’ identities, might be manifested, challenged, and rewarded in the virtual world of a video game. My discussion has implications for the design of games in general and for the design of games for women in particular.

Women and Video Gaming

The highly sexualized representations of women in games, along with the predominance of fighting as a central game feature, have been the primary focus of concern as barriers to women gamers and a negative influence on (and reflection of) male behavior. These images and practices are assumed to represent masculine pleasures and desires that are inherently unappealing to women. For example, pleasure in combat, or physical aggression, as reflected in the wide range of games that emphasize war, shooting, and swordplay, is viewed as an expression of both biology (higher levels of testosterone) and socialization (men are expected to be strong, brave, and physically powerful). Psychological studies in general report consistent gender differences in aggressive behavior; however, such differences are relative, not categorical (i.e., females tend to be less aggressive than males, but females do exhibit aggressive behavior, and some men are less aggressive than some women), and the aggressiveness of both sexes declines with age (Coie & Dodge, 1998;

Goldstein, 2001; Hyde, 1986). Thus, assertions that combat will hold uniform appeal for all boys and men, or that girls and women consistently will find combat unappealing, are misleading and somewhat exaggerated.

An additional theory is that gender biases in video games are intrinsic to deeper structures of game play (Graner Ray, 2004). For example, researchers in the mid-90s, based on interviews with middle school girls, concluded that girls prefer and are more adept at types of game play that differ in systematic ways from those preferred by boys. Their findings resulted in generalizations such as girls enjoy games that include complex characters and multiple social relationships, group problem solving and cooperation, and emotionally engaging narratives (Laurel, 1998). Graner Ray (2004) describes a variety of presumably "female" gaming styles, ranging from a preference for indirect competition to a desire to "accomplish something" rather than simply win.

Such generalizations have been used as the basis for the development of a briefly successful series of "girl games" (Laurel, 1998) and used to explain the popularity of games such as *The Sims* for women. The girl games approach has been criticized in the popular press and by academics for reinscribing popular stereotypes about women and seeming to assume that gender differences in gaming are innate and immutable (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). Furthermore, as Taylor (2006) has pointed out, much research has ignored potential age differences by extrapolating findings from girls' gaming preferences to adult women, whereas in fact we might assume that individuals enact gender differently across the lifespan. With a few notable exceptions (i.e., Taylor, 2003), most studies simply report statistics about women's preferences for casual games, or their growing numbers in multiplayer games, without any in-depth investigation of their experiences, motivations, or game play. Too often, the picture presented is simply in opposition to an equally stereotypical male gamer; the woman gamer enjoys puzzle games because they are not competitive or enjoys online games with opportunities for social interaction (as if men did not play puzzle or multiplayer games as well).

Some researchers have focused on the opportunities that video gaming provides for experimenting with new identities, identities that might challenge dominant conceptions of gender roles. These scholars assume that gender is socially constructed and, as such, fluid and amenable to change. Much of this work has focused on identity construction in multiplayer, online spaces, starting with text-based, MUDs and more recently shifting to graphical massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) such as *Everquest*. This work suggests that women and men take pleasure in a variety of practices and identities in virtual worlds (Taylor, 2003, 2006). However, the notions of fluid identity construction and freedom in identity play have been increasingly questioned, as researchers have noted the influence of social norms and expectations regarding gendered behaviors even within these presumably negotiable spaces (Hanson, Flansburg, & Castano, 2004; McDonough, 1999; O'Brien, 1999).

This work has led to some important insights regarding diversity among women gamers and the effects of social context, though these insights have had little impact

on common stereotypes about women gamers. One limitation is that the emphasis on player interactions with each other as a source of gender stereotypes, and experimentation with new identities, seems to relegate identity issues to a particular kind of game. Ironically, such research might also subtly reinforce gender stereotypes by focusing on games that, with their potential for social interactions, are assumed to appeal more to women. Closer examinations are needed of game play within the vast range of single-player games, games that are growing in diversity and sophistication (Krotoski, 2004). Many top-selling games cross traditional boundaries of game genres, offer more opportunities for character development (*Fable*), reward problem solving and patience as much as brute force and aggression (*Thief*), and build complex narratives (*Knights of the Old Republic*). In effect, these games combine attributes associated with “girl games” and “boy games.” A number of these games are marketed by designers as open-ended opportunities for players to explore their own personalities, ethical beliefs, and values. For example, the well-known designer Peter Molyneux is known for creating games, such as *Populus*, *Black and White*, and *Fable*, that reflect his desire to let people act out and explore their own personalities (Totilo, 2004). These games would seem to offer a wealth of opportunities for the study of gender and game play. How might women respond to the content and design of such games? In what ways is gender significant when games offer a wider variety of choices in game play and when such choices are not influenced by real and potential interactions with other players? Such questions served as the starting point for my research.

Gendered Identities in Practice

Building on the more recent work on identity and gaming, I adopt the perspective that video games are contexts for the enactment of and experimentation with gendered identities (Deaux & Stewart, 2001). The concepts of identities in practice and figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) are also central to my analyses.

There are many ways of thinking about gender and identity; the notion of gendered identities is based on several related assumptions. First is the assumption that the identities available to us derive from our affiliation with various communities of practice (Gee, 2005), or discourse communities, and their respective belief systems, or discourses. Gender belief systems shape our understandings of what women and men should be like and thus can have a significant effect on our own behavior and how we perceive and treat others (Kite, 2001). This perspective does not rule out the influence of biologically based gender differences, such as tendencies toward aggressive behavior, but it does suggest that the meaning and significance of those differences will be shaped by individual experiences and culturally mediated belief systems, which can include accentuating or diminishing our perception of differences (Campbell, 2002).

A second assumption is that gender identities (and belief systems) may vary considerably as they intersect with other identities or membership categories. There are

many ways of being masculine and feminine, and these ways vary according to their intersections with race, class, culture, and other factors. Gender is only one of many membership categories that may affect one's access to certain ways of being, knowing, and acting.

Thirdly, individuals may act out feminine or masculine identities differently according to the immediate situation and over time. From this perspective, our identities are continuously "in process," or negotiated, influenced by and influencing our social environments. We "do gender" differently according to the possible identities available to us and the expectations within a particular situation (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998; Taylor, 2006), which in turn vary across historical and cultural contexts. This idea is captured in the concept of identities in practice, which shifts notions of identity from inner "core" traits to outward manifestations of particular practices associated with being particular kind of people.

An additional assumption is that our identities are not overdetermined, and we continually improvise identities in practice within new situations for which we have no set response, drawing on past identities and new forms of interpretation that are available and attractive. The pull of socially acceptable identities is strong, and we feel pressure to conform to expectations for particular ascribed or socially acceptable identities; for instance, girls may prefer games that reproduce gender stereotypes by allowing them to enact what they believe (consciously or unconsciously) is expected of them as girls (Cassell & Jenkins, 1998). However, opportunities for, or even the necessity of, improvising identities that do not conform to such expectations yield the possibility of altered self-conceptions or identities and learning new meanings and practices associated with these identities.

Certain identities, including gender, affect one's access to certain forms of interpretation and knowledge. Holland et al. (1998) use the concept of *figured world* to describe the ways in which our social groups and their associated belief systems lead us to interpret or "figure" our worlds in particular ways. These worldviews are often taken for granted and unquestioned until they are juxtaposed with other frames of interpretation. The way that experience and identities are represented in personal narratives is dependent on the availability of public narratives, some of which may be gender specific. Men and women may not have access to the same repertoire of narratives through which to make sense of their lives or to invest them with meaning (Gergen, 1991, 1994; Somers, 1994).

Video games too offer particular frames of meaning, possible identities, practices, relationships, and value systems. Players orient to the figured world of a particular game in varied ways, according to their past and present affiliations with other figured worlds. Gee (2003) argues that the figured worlds, or cultural models inherent in video games, are important in reinforcing or challenging players' taken-for-granted perspectives on the worlds. Video games (good ones, at least) allow players to project their hopes and desires onto the virtual character; these projective identities, as an intersection of the player's real-life identities and the identity of the virtual character, can be

the source of new ways of viewing the world and the self, at least in theory. Gee offers some examples of commercial games that might challenge players' perspectives of, for instance, the heroics of war and the nature of good and evil, and their assumptions about learning and themselves as learners. The literature on gender and gaming seems to adopt a similar line of argument, that games might be developed that can challenge rather than (seemingly) reinforce limiting perspectives of gender and identity. However, we have little documentation of how particular women (or men, for that matter) respond to the figured worlds of particular games, or how those games might reinforce or challenge players' perspectives on themselves and the world.

Method

In this article, I describe the experiences of two women with playing *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind* to explore how they enacted gendered identities in context of the game and how they interpreted its opportunities for improvisation and engagement with new forms of identity. The women brought very different personal histories and self-perceptions to the game, and I will suggest how these contributed to their gaming experiences.

The women were playing the game to meet a requirement for a graduate course intended to explore how video games are designed to support learning. This course provided an important site for the women's co-construction of identities as gamers and for their interpretation of their gaming experiences. I attended all class sessions as a participant-observer.

I invited these two women to participate in two individual interviews over the semester that they took the course. I selected them from the class because they were playing the same game (the participants had the freedom to choose from a wide variety of games), and the game's features offered considerable flexibility in game-play strategies. Each interview lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. In the first interview, I asked the participant to describe her family, her past school and work experiences, her prior gaming experiences, and her interest in the course. During the second interview, we talked in considerable depth about various aspects of her game play, and I watched as she played the game.

The two women shared certain demographic characteristics: They were both White, middle class, and in their late 20s at the time of the interview. One was a doctoral student in composition studies, and the other was a master's-level student in education. Although both had played video games as children, their gaming ended when they entered their teens, and neither had played since then. Both of them suggested that their gaming had ended, in part, because a brother gradually took over the game console, becoming more adept and discouraging their participation.

The popular construal of video gaming as a pastime for adolescent boys has a significant influence on girls' and women's orientations toward gaming. Although the

course itself was not the focus of this particular study, it played an important role in giving legitimacy to the women's gaming. The students happened to be all female (this was not true in subsequent semesters), and gender often emerged as an explicit topic in class discussion. As an example, the unexpected pleasure of combat combined with "shopping" (in games that included finding or buying armor, other clothes, and equipment for characters) became a recurring source of amusement and collective identification in class. The class allowed the women to construct positive identities as gamers and created a supportive community in which the women could connect gaming to other significant identities, particularly their identities as educators, researchers, and students.

Also important for the women in this study were conversations with their friends and other people about gaming. They were required to informally interview other gamers, but the women also enjoyed talking about their games with friends and family who were not gamers. Typically, the responses they reported were ones of surprise and even mild ridicule, which were offset by their sense of exploring an important though transgressive social practice. Lastly, they both were single adult women who had the time, space, and technological resources needed for gaming, eliminating some of the material constraints that often seem to shape adult women's gaming practices.

The Figured World of Morrowind

Morrowind is the third in the series of Elder Scrolls role-playing games. Role-playing games allow players to develop one or more characters by selecting attributes at the beginning and throughout the game through making choices about strategies and skills. As the creators of Morrowind state, players' actions define their characters, and their game play changes and evolves in response to their actions. The plot or story line is more or less structured by a set of challenges or quests that allow the player to improve her or his skills, explore the world of the game, and achieve goals more or less related to the story line. The Elder Scroll series, particularly Morrowind, is distinctive in its open-endedness, offering players a vast number of choices about how to develop their character, what types of goals and activities to pursue. Some otherwise avid gamers even have complained that the game is too vast and loosely structured.

Morrowind is the name of an island, encompassing geographies ranging from desert and mountains to swamps and forests, each associated with different creatures and cultures. Typical of many fantasy-based video games, Morrowind is inhabited by an exotic set of peoples and cultures, with interwoven histories that provide a context for the overall story line. The game begins at the following critical point in Morrowind's history:

In 3E 427, with Imperial authority weakened by questions of succession, the already shaky Imperial administration of Morrowind was threatened by the re-awakening of an ancient curse beneath the giant volcano Red Mountain, also called "Dagoth-Ur." An

Imperial courier marked by the stars, born on a certain date to uncertain parents, came to Morrowind a stranger and outlander, and lived to become one of that nation's most enduring legends. (Bethesda Softworks, 2006)

The player arrives at Morrowind on a prison trip as this unnamed and undefined stranger, and the main story line unfolds through the gradual discovery of this initial identity and the player's choices about how to pursue the challenges that she or he confronts, thus creating a (somewhat) unique story for her or his character.

Because this identity is hidden from even the player at the outset of the game, it has little impact on the player's choice of character traits, which is initiated after an introductory scene in which she or he arrives at Morrowind. The player can choose from 10 races with different histories and abilities, including elves, orcs, cat-like and reptilian creatures, and seemingly human peoples. The player also chooses her or his character's class, another set of skills, from 21 different options in three general specializations: combat, magic, and stealth. Some examples include warriors, barbarians, and scouts (combat), mages, sorcerers, and healers (magic), and thieves, acrobats, and monks (stealth). Lastly, the player chooses one of 13 "birthsigns," such as the apprentice, the lady, and the lover, which supplies one or more strengths and limitations. The player can choose from a huge number of potential combinations of attributes.

The player is thrust into the game with little sense of direction or orientation, assigned an initial task to complete in return for her or his freedom. Although there is a loosely structured overall story line, with a series of related quests that gradually reveal the player's identity and mission, a myriad of other quests are offered by various characters in the game, ranging from guild masters to entities randomly encountered in towns and countrysides. Some quests require "hacking and slashing," but others rely more on stealth, persuasion, and strategy.

Constructing Identities

The women described themselves and their past experience in ways that suggest the particular configuration of identities and dispositions that they brought to playing Morrowind. Here, I describe what became the most salient attributes in relationship to each woman's gaming.

Joanna: "Having Talent, Not the Motivation"

Joanna grew up in the suburbs of a Midwestern city, one of three children, the daughter of parents who both worked in the health insurance industry. She described herself, however, as coming from a long line of academics and explained that all of her extended family were academics, identifying in particular her maternal grandparents. She called herself a "troublemaker" and a "bad student" who barely graduated from high school by almost failing chemistry. In certain subjects, such as English and forensics, she

excelled, and she attributed her poor school performance to “having the talent not the motivation.” This theme pervaded descriptions of her undergraduate experience, where she took 5 years to complete her degree. She majored in creative writing because “I got A’s in English and I knew that I didn’t really care that much about literature. I just liked the writing part of it.”

After college and a difficult end of a relationship, she moved to Chicago with a friend and found a job in advertising, working on the account of a prominent company, which she described as “pretty glamorous.” The account folded, and after a brief stint in a less-exciting position, she entered a master’s degree program in English, a life choice, she said, that “again it wasn’t a passion. It was choosing the thing that sucked the least.”

Joanna described herself as frequently bored and only temporarily passionate about anything. In her current position as a consultant at the University Writing Center, one of Joanna’s responsibilities was to advise faculty on improving writing instruction:

I spend a lot of time listening to people talk about themselves . . . pretty much it’s just everybody’s telling the same story. And so you get bored really fast. . . . I’d much rather find somebody tomorrow and fall in love with him and go to Vegas and have babies and live in the suburbs . . . [but] I’m sure after 2 or 3 years I’d get pretty sick of it. . . . So I have a passion for things for a while.

Joanna did express a “passion” for one thing, new technologies, and she used the Internet regularly to keep “up to date”: “I love the technology because it’s always about what’s next. Instead of what is.” This desire to find out “what’s next” was a key factor in her interest in video gaming. She heard the professor give a talk on video gaming and learning, and

I can’t remember the last time I was excited about a theory. The way he talks about the way he things, seems to parallel the way I think quite a bit. . . . He understands what’s next, with kids, and how they learn. And what we need to do as teachers.

Another significant theme in Joanna’s interview concerned a conflict between other people’s perceptions of her as extroverted and her own sense of herself. She liked to talk with people (despite the boredom she described in her consultations with instructors) and, as she explained,

People think that . . . I’m really, really extroverted. And I’m not at all. I’m just very outgoing, and that’s different. I don’t get excited by being in big groups of people, I don’t get stimulated by party situations.

Deidre: “I Have To Do It My Way”

Science and teaching figured strongly in Deirdre’s family background, and she explained that “I come from a family of scientists.” Her father was an astronomer at

a university in the Southwest, who taught courses at a local community college and ran a summer astronomy camp for teens. Her mother was a high school physics teacher, whose siblings and father also had graduate degrees in science. Both of her parents were involved with youth groups through the church, as was Deirdre, and the church became a setting for her own interests in education and for the development of her values and an orientation toward “helping others.” Though she described herself as a shy teenager, she took a leadership role in the church youth group and “loved getting people together and doing stuff.”

Deirdre, not surprisingly, did quite well in high school science, and in other subjects, and described herself (in contrast to Joanna) as having both talent and discipline: “I have a very good work ethic; so I got actually more A-pluses in high school than I did As, because I’m naturally intelligent or whatever.” Her talent for “understanding things” is evident in her enjoyment of math: “I loved trigonometry. It was, like, organizing and fitting things in the right way . . . and those analytical puzzles [like] the GRE and the analytical section. . . . I loved it.”

A key theme throughout Deirdre’s interview was an orientation toward being and doing what she “loved.” As an undergraduate, she initially planned to major in chemistry, with the goal of being a doctor, because she “wanted to work with people, and I was good at science.” However, she explained that

talking with other people, that, you know, being a doctor and going into chemistry. . . . I just wasn’t as on fire about it as they were; and then I’m thinking, you know, maybe the reason. . . . I felt that pressure growing up, especially as a girl, a girl being good in science.

She credited her undergraduate program with

helping me think for myself and really pay attention to what I was interested in, and not just do it because that was what was assigned. . . . you really felt, in a deep way, just what it meant to be a woman in a society and churches and all of these different messages . . . sometimes conflicting . . . coming to terms with, “I have to do it my way.”

Deidre related this self-acceptance to her body and her femininity: “I had accepted myself bodily as a female. I found myself becoming more athletic; and I had never, ever been athletic.”

In her senior year, she “fell in love with curriculum and instruction. . . . I really saw it as a way of combining a lot of my interests.” She majored in Christian education and the Bible, then took a position working with children and college students at a church. She left after a year, citing stress over meeting the church’s expectations:

Then I allowed me to get to know myself, and make some friendships and just get to know a different city and all that sort of stuff. . . . I’m a little bit stronger now, and now I know myself better, and know that I don’t have to meet everyone’s expectations.

After several years, she entered graduate school: “There was so much more that I wanted to learn; and this was a completely different environment in some ways. I love what I’m doing. . . . I’d like to get a Ph.D. eventually.” She took the course because of her interest in out-of-school learning:

Video games is not a school-oriented thing. And so, to me that, you know, automatically opens up different ways of learning. . . . I really want to be able to talk and learn from youth and kids you know, even people my age; and having . . . finding common interests.

Deirdre also expressed a personal interest in gaming and felt the class gave her a way to justify devoting time to gaming. In addition, she stated, rather wistfully: “It’s great to have a grad school class where reading and writing is not the only the thing that you do. . . . I miss terribly math and science classes.”

Identities At Play

The ways that each woman oriented toward *Morrowind* and authored herself as a gamer were clearly influenced by the ways that she had come to understand herself and enact certain identities in the past. In this section, I will discuss several aspects of their gaming experience: their initial creation of an avatar (their “identity” within the game), their “identity in practice” within the game, and, lastly, how the game seemed to encourage exploration of “new” identities within and beyond the game. I will give particular attention to how their experiences correspond to common assumptions about women’s orientations toward combat and problem solving within the game.

Joanna and Deirdre chose to play *Morrowind* for reasons that reflected their more general dispositions. Joanna, motivated by her interest in the cutting edge, wanted to play a game that reflected what her professor identified as good learning principles. Adopting the approach she took to investigating other new technologies, she used the Internet to gather information about different games and decided that “everything I read about *Morrowind* said this is the most open-ended, the most nonlinear, . . . the user has the most control.” Deirdre based her choice more on her own limited past experience with games and on what she thought she would enjoy:

I mainly wanted a computer game [like the one] I played on a week’s vacation with my aunt and uncle. . . . I wanted an exploratory, kind of first-person sort of game. I thought about multiple-player games or, you know, like, more kind of strategy games ‘cause I had some friends that play those. . . . I just like the first-person perspective, I believe, rather than if you’re trying a lot of different people for a war-time strategy. To me, it was more. . . . Well, I guess it’s more personal.

These initial orientations toward the game were reflected in various, though not always consistent, ways in each woman’s game play.

Creating Virtual Identities

A player's initial choice of avatar (if such a choice is possible) is the first conscious way that a player constructs an identity within a game world. In *Morrowind*, as with other role-playing games, the avatar's set of attributes can have a significant effect on subsequent game play, by making certain practices more or less possible and desirable. Joanna and Deirdre were both quite deliberate in how they constructed their respective characters, emphasizing what they wanted to experience in the game and what they felt comfortable with. Consistent with gender stereotypes, both women wanted to avoid fighting or physical aggression, and that desire played a major role in how they constructed their characters. However, they created quite different characters, reflecting to a surprising extent how they described their real-life identities and dispositions.

Joanna initially chose a race (Breton) that had strong magic skills, but she found that magic wasn't to her liking:

I didn't think that I would be very good at fighting. So I chose a character that was good at magic. But I realized that it took the same skill to be good at magic as it does to like cook? And I'm like, I hate cooking [both laugh]. But you have to like want to collect ingredients and put things together and make things, and I'm like I don't care about that. You know, I just wanna kill things.

Joanna initially wanted to avoid fighting because she "didn't think she's be very good at it" rather than objecting to the act of fighting itself. Some experience with the game taught her that "killing things" was not as bad as she imagined, particularly because it enabled her to more quickly obtain useful items, so she changed characters after quite a few hours of game play. Reflective of how she chose the game itself, Joanna did a lot of research before selecting her final character:

This character? I started looking him up, looking in here, and looking online and looking in all the different places and . . . I started reading about them and what their different skills were. . . . So I'm an Imperial. I wanted something that was okay, [reading] "Well educated and well spoken, physically less imposing than the other races, the Imperials have proved to be shrew diplomats and traders." Um . . . so anyway, and instantly when I started with this character, everybody was just so much nicer to me. [laughs] So I could get things, I could manipulate them better, which was cool. I really like it.

Her pleasure in this character, then, was derived from the ability to use interpersonal skills, rather than force, to accomplish goals, very consistent with gender stereotypes but also with Joanna's own (conflict-laden) social orientation.

Deirdre expressed an even stronger desire to be a character that did not rely on violence. She chose to be a Khajiit, a cat-like character that she selected for its agility and acrobatic skills, enabling her to act out her recent interest in physicality and to avoid fighting with a strength in stealth:

They're very . . . well, acrobatic. And athletic. . . . Those are the stronger characteristics. And I liked the idea that . . . they can get places that a lot of other people can't. Because of their acrobatics skills, they can jump better, and that's the theme. So, that really appealed to me.

However, she wound up with what she described as an unusual combination of traits because of her desire to also act out her interest in healing:

You would think I'd want to go to the stealth class, because that's kind of like they sneak around, get to places, evade the fights. . . . But I really wanted to be a lay healer, so then I didn't have to kill anyone. Well, I have killed people in self defense 'cause then you're not going to have a choice. . . . [Healing] has personal associations for me, too, because in my college experience and in the areas of my jobs in ministry that. . . . I'm interested in healing of people.

Thus, both women constructed characters that, at least initially, reflected their own skills and identities, including a presumably gendered orientation toward avoiding physical aggression and toward social interaction. However, their preferences were far more nuanced and complex than a simple choice between competitive and cooperative behavior (see Taylor, 2003, 2006, for similar examples of more-complex character formation among women gamers). Joanna constructed a character that "killed things" to help her accomplish quests and obtain items more quickly while at the same time manipulating people to accomplish goals as well. Deirdre wanted a character that enabled her to enact her personal pleasure in exploration, physical agility, and healing. Both women created hybrid characters that both challenged and conformed to gender stereotypes.

Physical appearance did not appear to play a major role in the women's choice of characters. The avatars in *Morrowind* are not as hyper-sexualized as those in many other games, and some characters appeared androgynous because of their clothing. Both of the women chose a female character, though neither woman identified gender as a key factor in her choice of character. The women did take pleasure in the appearance of their characters and clothing they found or purchased, and as I will describe later, for Joanna in particular her character's appearance was something she learned to use strategically in the game.

Identities in Practice

Just as the *Morrowind* creators intended, Joanna and Deirdre were able to take very different approaches to developing their characters' abilities, which also meant that they acquired quite different sorts of knowledge related to game play. Joanna was immediately drawn to social interactions within the game, which developed her character's personality skills:

I just do a lot social things in this game. I go around and talk to people a lot. So like my personality is really high. My speech craft skill, mercantile skills. Nor really high but relatively high. But my illusion, my magic is like 17. And I only like to use like certain weapons.

She relied on cheat codes to increase her abilities related to fighting, which reduced her desire to build up those traits. Her focus on social skills was so strong that it affected how she construed the game as a whole:

Personality, I always up that as much as I can because that affects how other characters respond to you. *And a lot of this game is talking to characters and getting them to do things for you* [italics added].

Morrowind allows players to increase the persuasiveness of their character by outfitting them with more attractive clothing. Joanna explained that she changed her clothes often, in response to different situations in the game:

[Interviewer: So do you change what you're wearing pretty often?] Mm hm. When I'm out about the town, or if I'm not fighting. Like right now, and people treat you differently depending on what you're wearing. So if I wear these exquisite pants and let's see, my boots of lighting speed, and my exquisite shirt, and I'm also wearing my exquisite belt here. And I do have exquisite shoes.

She enjoyed collecting clothing and other items through fighting and stealing. This focus on gathering reframed her assessment of certain character traits. For example, she explains strength as

how much you can carry. Well up until now, I didn't really have anywhere to keep stuff, my stuff. Or to get back there quickly. I still don't have that. So I like to have a lot of strength so I can carry a lot of stuff. . . . [It] really sucks when you kill somebody who has this really awesome armor, and you wanna take it, and you can't carry it, you know.

To Joanna, the value of strength was additional ability to carry loot rather than an increase in fighting ability because she relied on power ups.

Deirdre's character development was closely tied to her use of alchemy and other forms of the magical arts, the very skills that Joanna did not develop. She discovered a love for making potions early in the game and compared it to activities that she enjoyed in real life:

After I fulfilled a certain number of quests, they gave me some alchemy stuff. I like picking up the ingredients; and I like making the potions; and I like using the potions. [Interviewer: What do you think you like about it?] I like cooking. I like chemistry. I like combining things. I like the idea that I can become self-sufficient.

Both Joanna and Deirdre associated potion making with cooking, a stereotypically female activity and thus an easy association for both of them. Although Joanna expressed a dislike of cooking and, by correspondence, of potion making, Deirdre was drawn to potion making not only out of its similarity to cooking but also to her less stereotypical enjoyment of chemistry. And just as importantly, making potions related to a sense of independence that Deirdre valued: "It gives me a feeling of self-sufficiency, because I don't have to buy potions from people. I can make them, and I can sell them." Thus, the meaning that Deirdre gave to potion making was tied not only to its similarity to real-life practices she enjoyed but also to the importance she placed on independence, at least partially rooted in her past educational experiences. In terms of skill development, she again expressed a pleasure in having control and making her own decisions about her character: "I like the character design, because I feel like I have a lot of control over which skills I build. But in alchemy, I mean, I just wanted to build that skill."

Making potions became central to Deirdre's other strategies and skills. She found that she could sell potions at a profit:

I can buy lots of ingredients. . . . If I can combine 2 ingredients, it's, like, worth 25. So, if you just buy the right ingredients, you just get all of it [your money] back. I've run people out of money; and then you have to wait 24 hours, until they have a restocking . . . I'm a real leader in money.

Thus, the two women construed the game in quite different ways. Deirdre figured or understood the game world primarily in terms of its opportunities for making choices and gaining a sense of autonomy. In contrast, Joanna figured the world as one that required that she impressed or battled other characters to get things from them or to complete quests.

A note about narrative: Discussions of women's gaming preferences often refer to the importance of narrative, or story, as a means of creating emotional engagement, presumed to be particularly motivating for women. Neither Joanna nor Deirdre found *Morrowind's* story line to be compelling. Joanna complained that the story was too familiar and wished for something more innovative. Deirdre said, "The story to me is not as engaging right now because you have to do so much between different plot lines." She did suggest a connection among exploring new worlds, encountering new characters, and "figuring out" how they fit into the overall narrative, which she enjoyed as "detective work." Graner Ray suggests that a game's backstory, even if not known by the player, might be even more important than a narrative as a basis for constructing a cohesive, compelling world. Both women did emotionally respond to elements of *Morrowind's* story, for example, to winning a fight or to stealing a valuable item, and became engaged with the identities they created in the game. It may well be that a story is not as important, at least to some women, as a game world that allows them to enact meaningful identities in an emergent narrative of their own choosing.

Recreating Identities: Challenges and Pleasures

Two aspects of game play in *Morrowind* can serve as examples of how gaming might contribute to reframing identities. One aspect, combat, is most obviously gendered and to a great extent required to progress in the game's quest. The second aspect is the open-endedness of the game, which, at least in theory, allows players to make choices that might challenge and reinforce their current identities and dispositions.

Reframing combat. Combat in video games is second only to avatar appearance as a factor presumed to be unappealing or uncomfortable for women gamers. Joanna immediately identified fighting as the most challenging part of the game for her: "It took me a long time to get used to the fighting. And not getting really nervous, when I had to fight something. Oh, the fighting was hard." However, fighting became unavoidable if she wanted to obtain new items and complete tasks, which were considerable sources of pleasure for her. With the support of cheat codes, she experienced some success. Her nervousness and her pleasure were apparent in the gaming I observed:

Okay now I'm gonna now I need my little cheat here. . . . It'd be cool if I could kill these guys though 'cause they need to be killed . . . [playing] . . . I got 'em all! I hope I got 'em all, I'm not sure. . . . Oh this is good, now I can go back to the guy and tell him I killed them all. Well, there you got to see a fight. So much more exciting than wandering around talking to people, wasn't it?

Indeed, her character wore evidence of her success at fighting:

[Interviewer: How did you get that armor?] I killed somebody. [Interviewer: And they were wearing it, you got it off them?] Yeah, the green stuff. And then the orange stuff and the shield and the helmet I got from killing a different character. But the green stuff I got from killing. Isn't that cool?

For Joanna, confronting her anxiety in the game was as rewarding as facing fears in the real world (and suggests how deeply ingrained our self-perceptions can be):

That's what I love about these games is that it really it forces you to face down all of your fears. It's like the greatest thing in the world. I mean think about how motivating fear it, and how . . . and it's great because you get to test out all your fears in this virtual world.

Deirdre also was confronted with the need to engage in combat to accomplish goals in the game. She expressed more frustration than anxiety over fighting, frustration that she could not heal other characters and instead was compelled to fight, at least occasionally. She began with a character strong in hand-to-hand combat (no weapons) and took pleasure in developing this skill:

Initially in the game, I couldn't kill people for the life of me, now. . . . It doesn't matter if they're using magic or if they're using, you know, weapons or whatever, my hand-to-hand is so huge. And [my professor] couldn't believe it, that I could kill all these people hand-to-hand. I mean, he was telling Joanna and I, at the very beginning, "You'd better build up your weapons skill," and not just stick with, like, light armor . . . hand-to-hand or whatever.

She coped with fighting by approaching it, as she did the game itself, as a puzzle to be solved: "I just figured out how to use magic to kill a couple creatures in another world, versus spending five minutes in arm-to-arm combat. So, I'm learning how to manipulate the system a little bit." For Deirdre, fighting was not facing fear as much as reframing the activity to fit her own orientation to the game. She came to enjoy what she construed as the problem solving required to win battles. She said that "once I've been able to succeed the challenges on my own, then I could see doing that (using cheats) 'cause I've already solved that problem. . . . Why bother doing it again?" However, she continued to resist killing when it seemed to violate her own ethical principles:

In Balmora, you're told, "Oh, the head of the Imperial Army wants to talk to you." So, I go talk to him. He's, like, "You know, there are these five people that are really causing me problems." And I had already talked to those five people, and they were very evil people. They tell you, "Yes, we're just waiting for the day when we can come kill everyone in their beds." OK. So, they deserve to die. But I didn't want to go do his dirty business. I'm, like, "I'm not gonna go do that!"

For women, combat, real or virtual, is not a common or socially acceptable practice, unlike for men, who from childhood to are likely to be expected to engage in or at least see examples of combat associated with powerful masculine identities. Although combat is only one of three specializations in the game, as a practice it pervades game play and thus was unavoidable. Some research suggests that girls and women do not mind violence itself as much as the repetition of the same violent acts again and again; in effect, they are more easily bored (Graner Ray, 2004). One popular theory has refocused the issue away from physical combat by suggesting that women prefer indirect rather than direct competition (from an evolutionary perspective, because females as childbearers have to be more physically cautious than males). Neither of these perspectives takes into account the different interpretations and identities associated with violence for women and men. For a very early age, most boys are immersed in social worlds in which physical aggression is a valued and common way of gaining status. They gain a lot of experience with (toy) weapons and currently with virtual weapons. Swords are, in effect, "male tools." Girls, like Joanna and Deirdre, are literally "pushed out" of the game and never develop a sense of mastery with fighting, nor does fighting ever become a source of identity for

them. Instead, Joanna feared that she would not be good at fighting, and Deirdre perceived healing to be a more gratifying and identity-reinforcing practice. However, fighting ultimately became a source of mastery and pleasure for each woman. Although I would not necessarily suggest that women be encouraged to engage in physical combat, virtual or otherwise, we do need to more fully understand the multiple meanings of combat in games, positive and negative, for both women and men.

Being and doing what you want. The open-endedness of the game was presumably an opportunity for the women to play with identities, yet as my preceding discussion as suggested, this play was bounded to some extent by their real-life identities, pleasures, and goals. Both women enjoyed the ability to engage in what they perceived to be transgressive behavior in the game. Joanna enjoyed “breaking the rules” more within the parameters of the game, still trying to play the game in the “right way” and measuring her progress in terms of completing the main quest objectives. Deirdre took pleasure in challenging the parameters of the game itself, exploring the territory rather than pursuing quests, choosing her quests more selectively, and developing specialized expertise. For both women, the game presented opportunities to enact identities that they valued and were trying to enact in their real life as well.

The open-endedness of the game presented a challenge that each woman approached in very different ways. Joanna, who stated that she wanted to “master the game—I want to make it to the end,” accumulated a huge number of resources, such as walkthroughs, cheat codes, and maps, to facilitate her game play. She restarted the game after a significant amount of game play. She wanted to start over with a new character, she explained, so that “I could correct all those things I did wrong in the game . . . before I had no idea if I was doing the wrong thing.” Playing the game well had great personal significance for her:

If I had to keep going, it would have ruined it for me. . . . I had the same feeling as when I was little: “I’m never going to get any better at this, so I might as well give up now.” I didn’t want that—I want to get better, not give up. Now I have the motivation. [Interviewer: So what are you learning now?] I’m learning to not be afraid of (messing up). Because no matter what you do in this game . . . you can always turn around.

Still, she valued how the open-ended nature of the game allowed her to skip or postpone quests that seemed too challenging:

I’ll try to kill this guy here. If I can, I’m not sure if I can. . . . It’s from way back, it’s part of a guild quest that I haven’t fulfilled yet. But yeah, that’s what I love about this video game stuff is that you can kind of take ‘em or leave ‘em.

Although her reliance on cheats and guidebooks might suggest that Joanna was conforming to the preexisting structure of the game, she took great pleasure in acting out her identity as a rule breaker through her character’s actions within the game.

Describing an instance when she stole an item and the resulting reputation her character received as a thief, Joanna said:

That's what happens when you're bad. Yeah, the other thing I love about this game is like . . . I'm a pretty extremely irreverent person. [laughs] And so, I really, really, really, really hate rules. And I love it that this game let's me do whatever the hell I want. That's the best part.

Doing what she wanted, for Joanna, was not figuring everything out but choosing where to devote her energies, in her case completing quests, collecting items, and building an impressive set of resources for game play, all toward the goal of "not giving up" and mastering a new and challenging activity.

Deirdre identified a lack of specific directions as the "hardest part of the game" for her:

[Interviewer: What's been the hardest thing about this game, so far, for you?] I think initially just figuring it out because you're not given any explicit directions. I'm still figuring out what I can do.

Of course, she could have used the same resources that Joanna did to find answers to her questions (and she did occasionally look for information on the Web), but she enjoyed viewing tasks as problems to be solved. She also liked the ability to explore, to see new places, and to encounter new characters:

I think if I wanted to pursue a direct line, I know how I would do that. I'd just get in the Blades eventually and then follow those up. But I like that I can wander around and talk to people. It kind of gives you the feeling of an explorer. I kind of wonder, well, what new imaginative thing am I going to see?

She chose not to follow the main series of quests:

[Interviewer: So, you actually haven't made progress toward the main quest?] No . . . I don't want to bother going back to the guy, because I haven't had any other business in that city. . . . I'm also having fun on the things that I'm doing.

For her, what seemed to be most motivating was a sense of mastery that came from finding ways to deal with the game's ambiguity while being continually stimulated by new sights and experiences. She did complete numerous quests offered by her faction and those from characters she encountered by chance in the games, but even those quests she selected according to her own criteria:

This lady wants me to find the Ring of Darkness. If I go there and get it for her, she'll give me lots of good stuff. And it's a good way of building experience. And I haven't been there before; so I suppose, "Why not?" It's a little further away than any of my

other quests have been. But I also liked the idea that it wasn't so clear cut. It's not, "Go here, and here are the directions."

Discussion

These women's stories suggest several important points about gender, identity, and video gaming.

Playing Like a Girl? The Meanings of Gendered Practices

Women have different interpretations of and responses to overtly gendered practices within video games, reflecting different life experiences in combination with multiple facets of identity. These differences can appear even among women like Joanna and Deirdre who have overtly similar backgrounds and attributes. For example, how each woman construed combat in relation to her own identity and to its broader social meaning as a gendered practice seemed to be as important as any innate female tendency to avoid direct conflict or aggression. Each woman improvised identities and practices within the game that allowed her to engage in combat in ways that recruited her real-life identity. For Joanna, her lack of prior experience with success in combat, in combination with her own concerns about "doing things right," led her to figure fighting as a potential opportunity for failure. She initially tried to avoid fighting (by choosing a character that could make potions), but after discovering that she did not like potion making, she found cheat codes that enabled her to fight with some assurance of success. In contrast, Deirdre figured combat as something that conflicted with her desire to be a healer. Her preference for healing might be interpreted simply as an enactment of a stereotypically female orientation toward helping others. However, her affinity for healing becomes much more complex when understood in light of her real-life struggle over being a "girl good in science" and a goal of helping others that was strongly rooted in her religious background and the example of both parents.

These case studies support my initial argument for the value of developing a more holistic approach to understanding women's choices, pleasures, and challenges in game play, one that takes into account their past, present, and anticipated identities and goals. Rather than relying on generalizations about women and gaming, we need to acknowledge that women can have quite different responses to even overtly gendered practices, responses that may be more similar to or different from men's than we now realize.

Playing Like a Boy? Enjoying "Masculine" Pleasures

Women clearly can find pleasure in masculine practices within video games. As I noted previously, there is ample evidence of women who are avid players of the most stereotypically masculine-typed games, who enjoy fighting, competition, and independence as much as male players (e.g., the interviews with female gamers in

chapter 14 of Cassell & Jenkins, 1998, and in Taylor, 2003). Although often viewed as aberrations or unique subsets of women, some research suggests that more women than might be expected find enjoyment in such practices. The two women in this study (and indeed, all of the women in their graduate course) were not initially enthusiastic about fighting yet ultimately took considerable pleasure in successful battles. One explanation for this somewhat unexpected pleasure is offered by Cunningham (2000, cited in Taylor, 2003), who argues that

in most areas of society this violent and aggressive side of a girl/woman's nature has to be repressed in conformity to socially expected norms of what is acceptable "feminine" behavior. Playing violent games gives female players the chance to express this aggression in a safe context. (p. 33)

Taylor (2003) suggests that women's enjoyment of violence in video gaming results not from the fighting per se but from public display of proficiency in a valued practice: "The actual fight is as much an opportunity to demonstrate the valued qualities of game mastery as anything" (p. 34).

To some extent, then, the context of the game has an important influence on women's pleasure in combat. Fighting, when figured within the game world as a valued practice that requires skill and that is crucial to accomplishing goals, becomes a source of power and mastery. Notably, however, in Taylor's (2003) work and for the two women in this study, the pleasures of fighting were connected to other goals and identities. The women in Taylor's study were playing *Everquest*, and fighting skills were essential for participating in raids and otherwise gaining status among other players. In the single-player context of *Morrowind*, these social relationships did not exist. However, for the women in this study, skill in combat was not a primary source of identity as much as a means of supporting practices more integral to these identities, a means of gathering great clothes, potion ingredients, exploring new lands, or doing things right. Thus, fighting was related to and intersected with, for these women, more familiar practices and identities.

This suggests that we need to understand how women (and men) experience games in their entirety, not simply how they react to particular elements in isolation. The interrelationship of various kinds of practices may be more important than any single attribute of a game. Simply taking out violence, or adding puzzles and social interactions, is not the way to make games that have broad appeal for women. In fact, games that combine elements associated with more stereotypically masculine and feminine pleasures and strengths may ultimately be the most stimulating and potentially valuable games for learning and entertainment.

Playing Like a Newbie? Confounding Gender and Experience

The two women in this study had very limited experience with video gaming, and their initial orientations to the game may be attributed, at least in part, to this lack of

experience. Past experience is one factor that has not been taken into consideration in much past research on women's and men's preferences in gaming. However, this may figure strongly in, for example, women's reported motivations and preferred learning styles. These case studies are suggestive of this possibility.

Some widely circulated assertions about gender differences in gaming include the following: (a) men are motivated simply by winning, whereas women want to accomplish something socially significant and beneficial; (b) men want to start over and accept punishment for errors, whereas women want errors forgiven and to continue on in the game; and (c) men prefer to learn through expository explanation, whereas women want to observe model game play (Graner Ray, 2004). On closer examination, women's preferences could be readily attributed to greater uncertainty about their odds of success in the game (forgiveness of errors), lack of concrete images of game play (modeling), and less potential for status among peers or identity reinforcement simply from "beating" the game (winning). Furthermore, the women in this study demonstrated quite different orientations to learning how to play the game that did not fit neatly into either stereotype. Joanna was quite motivated by winning, to prove that she could succeed; Deirdre was motivated by a desire to be what she wanted to be. Joanna chose to start over the game when she felt she was not "doing it right" and otherwise learned to avoid failure by using multiple resources. Deirdre opted out of playing the game the "right way" and did what she found most pleasurable; errors were simply part of figuring out the game, a source of learning rather than something to be punished or forgiven. Joanna relied on a wide variety of resources for learning; although modeling was not readily available, she readily used other people's advice and expository documents, whereas Deirdre preferred to figure things out on her own.

Playing With Dominant Narratives of Identity

My analyses show how each woman used the game not only to engage with familiar practices and identities but also to play with, or project, identities that they desired in real life. They both enjoyed a sense that they were breaking with rules and conventions, though in different ways. However, the women's projective identities remained relatively firmly located within readily available, popular discourses of desirable identities. Both women's life stories drew on the dominant Western conceptions of individual self-development, fulfillment, and achievement, success as based on "doing what you want," "talent and motivation," "not giving up," "doing things right."

Such conceptions are commonly thought to represent men's life circumstances and experience better than women's based on the assumption that women's identities are more likely to be tied to their relationships to others. The two women in this study were from highly educated, relatively affluent families and social groups in which their achievement was encouraged and valued, and their life stories indicate that they conceived their past histories in at least some ways as shaped by their own

decisions rather than by social relationships. The women's mothers and fathers were professionals, apparently devoted to their work, and thus the notion of having passion for one's endeavors was one that was evident in the women's own families.

However, both women struggled with this discourse of self-definition and development. Joanna openly rejected the notion of having passion for her life pursuits; Deirdre adopted it but struggled with finding and enacting her passion. Notably, after she finished her MS degree, Deirdre enrolled as a part-time PhD student while employed as a youth education director in a local church, but she dropped out of the program and quit her job to get married. She moved to another state with her new husband, where she planned to re-enroll in a new PhD program. In contrast, Joanna persisted in her PhD program but became increasingly immersed in gaming, ultimately refocusing her research on issues related to game design.

I note these additional experiences to illustrate the complexity of the women's choices and identities and the limitations of dominant narratives as a means of describing or questioning these identities. The world and narrative of *Morrowind* reflect a similar dominant discourse, that of the hero who gradually discovers his (or her) true identity through game play, both in terms of his or her overall life mission and his or her talents and skills. As Joanna observed, the story was indeed familiar, and the game allowed the women to play with new identities only within the context of this discourse. The familiarity of the narrative may have been in some ways a strength in providing a somewhat comfortable, or at least readily interpretable, context for the women's initial gaming experiences. A limitation could be that in its familiarity, this narrative did not sufficiently challenge the women's current perspectives and allow them to consider alternative perspectives.

This point is significant in thinking about the potential of any game as a site for the enactment of identities that challenge existing norms, gender related or more generally. Any game will of necessity be limited in the interpretations and enactments that it makes possible, both because of limitations in its own design and in the repertoire of narratives that players bring to game play. An issue in designing games to promote the exploration of new perspectives concerns finding a balance between supporting players' current perspectives and aspirations, within the context of dominant narratives, while at the same time providing opportunities for players to raise questions about the narratives themselves.

Replaying Gendered Identities: Fragmentation and Contradiction

Perhaps one of the most powerful ways that games might be used to explore new ways of "doing gender" is by challenging some fundamental assumptions about the nature of identity itself. In contrast to dominant beliefs about the normalcy and desirability of a single, coherent, core identity, each woman's life story and game play revealed contradictions and conflicts in her self-representations. Joanna resisted the social labels of introversion-extroversion as it applied to her own experience of social

interactions and questioned the role of passion in life choices while at the same time enjoying a game character who relied on talking to people and showing considerable intensity in her interest in new technologies. Deirdre identified contradictions between the expectations she felt placed on her as a “girl good at science” and her desire to help others. She rejected the one occupation she thought would enable her to integrate those two identities in favor of a career path that relegated scientific interests to a leisure pursuit. Despite her expressed pleasure in her new field, various comments suggested that she missed the type of problem solving inherent in science, and her pleasure in potion making within the game made this lingering conflict all the more apparent.

From a more traditional psychological perspective, such contradictions might be seen as dysfunctional, at least in real life. Even within role-playing games such as *Morrowind*, which purport to offer almost limitless choices for character development, not all choices are as functional as others. Deirdre noted, for example, that her character had an odd combination of initial abilities that required her to put more effort into developing certain skills. Joanna created a new character that better conformed not only to her own preferences but also to prevailing views of optimal character development in the game.

Recent scholarship challenges not only the normalcy but also the functionality of conceiving identity as singular and coherent, instead acknowledging that all identities are partial, fragmentary, and unstable. Although it may be necessary for us to retain some semblance of a consistent identity in our lives, it may also be desirable for us to be more accepting of contradictions and partiality in our identities, particularly in a social and historical context that now demands that we become “shape-shifting portfolio people” (Gee, 2004) who can recreate ourselves in light of changing workplace and community needs. This concept may be particularly important for the revisioning of new gender identities.

How might games recruit this conception of identities? Of course, as gamers move across different games, they can take on quite different identities, learning to adopt different perspectives and abilities. Role-playing games such as *Morrowind* and some others allow players to take on different identities by, as Joanna did, restarting the game with new characters. Harder to find are games that offer players the opportunity to move in and out of different identities or that reward atypical combinations of attributes and skills. Notably, enacting multiple identities by playing more than one character is a relatively common practice in MMORPGs. For example, the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* allows players to create up to six characters on a single account; the game space includes a different starting point for each race, adding novelty as an incentive for such experimentation. In addition, *World of Warcraft* allows players to remake an existing character during the game by redistributing talent points across new skills (for a fee, however). It is not hard to imagine how such opportunities might be incorporated into single-player games as well.

Authors such as Cassell (1998) have argued for games that allow girls (and boys) to experiment with new forms of gender identities, identities that do not simply

reflect back dominant and limiting conceptions of femininity and masculinity. My study illustrates the need to understand the multiplicity of ways of being and acting that adult women may bring to gaming that already challenge common stereotypes of so-called female abilities and preferences. We need further studies that challenge these stereotypes even further by incorporating a wider range of women from different backgrounds, including different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural groups. In addition, stereotypes of male players need also to be questioned. For example, many men play stereotypically female-typed games such as *The Sims*. What are the pleasures that they derive from such games, and how do these pleasures related to stereotypically masculine identities? What kinds of identities do men construct in open-ended games such as *Morrowind*? What conditions support men and women in adopting less stereotypical game play?

Future studies should continue to explore the potential of virtual worlds such as *Morrowind* to support the exploration of new forms of gender identities for both women and men. My analysis illustrates how existing gender identities influence women gamers' identities in virtual worlds; we also need to know how the enactment of virtual identities might influence real-world identities. Indeed, virtual worlds may offer opportunities to recreate gender identities in ways that we have only begun to imagine.

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