

Gender Studies in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games: A Literature Review

Xinai Sun^{1,a,*}

¹*The School of Economics and Management, Hubei University of Technology, Wuhan, Hubei Province, 430068, the People's Republic of China*

a. sxa12138@gmail.com

**corresponding author*

Abstract: Gender studies in video games, especially in the context of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), offer a critical perspective on the representation, experience, and perception of gender within the virtual realm of games, thereby contributing to discussions and insights into more inclusive and equitable gaming environments. In this paper, the author provides an overview of the latest developments in gender studies in games, particularly in the framework of massive multiplayer online RPGs, identify new areas of academic interest, and identify the issues and unexplored realms that have yet to be addressed in existing research, in order to serve as a point of reference for future gender-related topics that can be investigated in gaming.

Keywords: gender, online game, MMORPG, gender identity, video gamer

1. Introduction

Gender studies encompasses a wide range of social, cultural, and political aspects. As a special and important research perspective, gender research has extended different theories and methods to help deconstruct gender-related issues in other fields. Video games have seen a steady rise in popularity and growth in recent years, becoming a popular form of entertainment and social interaction, scholars have increasingly taken an interest in gender studies in video games, yielding both theoretical and practical outcomes. This article delves into the representation, experience, and perception of gender within the virtual realm of games, specifically in the context of massively multiplayer online role-playing games.

The bulk of research into gender roles in gaming, especially in video games, has concentrated on gender-specific characters and gamers and the links between them. On the one hand, games are included in the broader context of role-playing, where video games are subdivided into MOBAs, FPSs, and RPGs, depending on their focus and mode of play. RPG emphasizes the importance of role-playing and is constrained by the concepts of developers and designers in presenting different gender roles. Exploring the portrayal and expression of gender stereotypes, gender roles, and the portrayal of femininity and masculinity in RPG role-playing can reveal gender stereotypes and roles. On the other hand, RPGs create a space in which players can experiment with different gendered identities and expressions. Players construct and present their gender identities in these virtual environments, adopting different gender roles, expression styles and social interactions. The strong social attributes unique to MMORPGs make gender presentation a very important part of

interaction with others. Although MMORPGs are declining in mainstream discourse today as people turn their attention to more competitive and adversarial game genres, there are still a significant number of players who continue to flock to explore virtual worlds that are new to them.

Hence, this paper ultimately concentrates on some of the more recognizable MMORPGs of our time in an effort to investigate how the main emphasis of gender studies in this field has shifted over the years, what advancements and outcomes have been attained in approximately the past ten years. Gender studies offers a critical perspective on the representation, experience, and social dynamics of gender in MMORPGs. It helps to highlight how virtual worlds reflect and influence real-world gender norms, identities, and power structures, thereby contributing to discussions and insights into more inclusive and equitable gaming environments.

2. Conceptual Framework

2.1. Define Key Concepts

2.1.1. Gender

Gender encompasses the social, cultural, and psychological aspects of sex, as well as the roles, behaviors, activities, and expectations attributed to males and females within a specific society or culture. It is important to note that gender is different from biological sex, which refers to the physical and physiological differences between males and females. While biological sex is usually determined by an individual's anatomy and reproductive organs, gender is a social construct that varies across cultures and encompasses a range of identities and expressions beyond the binary understanding of masculinity and femininity. It is noteworthy that a considerable amount of research on gender in video games has taken Judith Butler's theory of gender performance into account, she perceives gender as a social construct that is malleable, varied, and can be altered through performance and symbolic representation.

2.1.2. Gender Stereotype

Gender stereotype refers to fixed, oversimplified and stereotyped perceptions and expectations of masculinity and femininity. The gender roles and norms of society and culture shape our perceptions and expectations, generally, men are linked to particular characteristics and actions, while women are connected to a different set of characteristics and actions. Gender stereotypes can include expectations that men should be strong, calm, rational, competitive, decisive, and dominant, and expectations that women should be gentle, considerate, emotional, dependent, subordinate, and concerned with appearance. The imposition of these stereotypes restricts the freedom of expression and choice for both the individual and society, in addition to acknowledging the importance of gender equality and diversity. In many role-playing games, the depiction of main characters or non-player characters reflects gender stereotypes, either explicitly or implicitly, as the industry progresses, male and female characters with bisexual and neutral personalities are becoming more and more sought-after by gamers.

2.1.3. RPG

An RPG is a game genre in which players take on fictional roles and drive the game's progression by simulating and playing the actions and decisions of their characters. Players can choose, customize, and control characters to explore the game world, complete quests, and interact with other characters. Games often include progression systems and non-linear storylines that give players the freedom to make decisions and choices that affect the development and ending of the

game. RPGs, in a more expansive context, can also encompass TRPGs, which emerged prior to the widespread adoption of video game consoles, as gaming consoles and computers have advanced, the portrayal of gender in gaming roles has become increasingly evident, particularly with the addition of more female gamers and developers, the video game industry has experienced a surge in tension and imagination.

2.1.4. MMORPG

MMORPG stands for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game. This video game genre enables numerous players to engage in the game world concurrently through the Internet. In MMORPGs, players can create and control their own virtual characters, interact, cooperate, or compete with other players, explore the game world, complete quests, fight monsters, and advance their characters. Unlike traditional single-player or local cooperative role-playing games, MMORPGs provide a shared virtual environment that acts like a community on the Internet, where players not only interact with NPCs, but also socialize with thousands of other players. When socializing, it is important to consider both the character and the player's gender identity. It is possible for characters to share the same gender as the player, and there exists a multitude of players who, driven by diverse motives, fabricate characters of the opposite gender.

3. Methodology for Review

This paper will begin by examining early gender studies related to MMORPGs in a chronological manner, the earliest date these studies can be traced back to, their general focus, and the limitations of these studies are all important factors. The paper will then focus on gender research in MMORPGs up to the present day, discussing how the topic has changed. In the conclusion, this paper will provide an overview of the latest developments in gender studies of games, particularly MMORPGs, identify new areas of academic interest, and identify the issues and unexplored realms that have yet to be addressed in existing research, in order to serve as a point of reference for future gender-related topics that can be investigated in MMORPGs.

4. Evolution of Gender Studies in MMORPGs

4.1. Early Studies: Discuss the Earliest Studies on Gender in MMORPGs

Before exploring the early days of gender studies in MMORPGs, it is worthwhile to have some basic understanding of when the genre came into existence and became popular. The actual origins of MMORPGs can be traced back to the late 1980's and early 1990's, but they existed mainly in large computer networks in the days before the internet was commonplace. "MUD" (Multi-User Dungeon) games, like the "AberMUD" and "Dungeons and Dragons" series, stand as some of the earliest illustrations.

However, MMORPGs really began to gain popularity after broadband Internet became generally available. The release of "Ultima Online" in 1997 marked the beginning of this new game genre, which was the first MMORPG to gain widespread acceptance and success. The mainstream popularity of MMORPGs came in 2004, when "World of Warcraft" was released, MMORPGs took the world by storm. "World of Warcraft" presented a vibrant and ever-evolving gaming universe that captivated countless players, establishing the MMORPG genre as widely acknowledged and embraced.

At first, the genre garnered significant academic attention due to its addictive nature. At that time, there were mixed reviews about computer games, and MMORPGs, with their multiple types of gameplay and immersive narrative experiences, required players to consume a lot of time to

experience their full content. Hsu S. H. et al. investigated five key factors that can be used to predict addiction to MMORPGs from a user experience design perspective through the method of an online survey (curiosity, role-playing, belonging, obligation and reward). These five factors can have a lasting impact on users, potentially leading to addiction and a heightened desire to remain in the game for an extended period of time [1].

At the same time that Internet addiction research gradually penetrated into the field of MMORPGs, scholars in the field of gender studies also began to pay attention to this rapidly growing online game genre with a large number of players. Early gender studies on MMORPGs around 2010 mainly included gender swapping, gender discrimination, and gender identity, among others.

4.1.1. Gender Swapping

Hussain Z. and Griffiths M. D. conducted a survey to examine the influence of MMORPGs on the social conduct of their players [2]. On the one hand, they found that there were significantly more male than female players who chose the option of “communicating online is easier than communicating offline”. On the other hand, 57% of the surveyed players had experienced gender switching (selecting a character of the opposite gender to portray themselves), the article argues that online female characters have many positive social attributes in male-dominated environments, encouraging a substantial number of men to select female characters for social interaction within the game. And this conclusion has been proved and expanded to some extent in later scholarly studies. Wang S. T. et al. found through their investigation of the MMORPG *Soul of Magic*, that in games with a 7:2 ratio of male to female players, the number of male players choosing female avatars was higher than the number of females choosing male avatars, which implies that gender-switching behaviors occur more often in males [3]. Nevertheless, due to the inherent male-to-female ratio, a more extensive selection of games might be necessary to enhance the reliability of this discovery. Moreover, early studies on gender switching have been limited to superficial quantitative comparative studies, with fewer qualitative and quantitative analyses that tap into the motivation behind the switch.

4.1.2. Gender Discrimination

Regarding sexism in MMORPGs, it is significantly manifested in the discrimination against women. Brehm, A. L. Based on the most mainstream MMORPG of the time, *World of Warcraft*, surveyed its forum users through questionnaires to find out the main topics of discussion and so on [4]. Its results showed that sexism was a more controversial topic in that game, and more than 63% of female respondents said they had suffered from sexism. However, the overall survey still showed that 64.4% of the players thought that sexism in the game was not a problem. The scholar advocates that the issue of sexism in MMORPGs should be taken seriously, as there are many people who are negatively affected by it. As for whether social group structure and identity affect game behavior, Wang, S. T. empirically demonstrated through a cluster analysis model, that using information such as player's gender, character's gender, and occupational type, it can predict players' game behavior patterns in the virtual world to a certain extent, and that different character incarnations affect players' game behavior [5]. However, there is a lack of research on whether different character avatars are affected by other people's gaming behaviors in a common way, especially whether female characters are often accosted and harassed.

4.1.3. Gender Identity

There are also some scholars who have researched on the perception of gender and sexual orientation in MMORPGs. Eklund, L. based on Judith Butler's performance theory, studied female players' performances of gender and sexual orientation in World of Warcraft [6]. She points out that the construction of gender identity is an ongoing process that is highly dependent on the social environment of the game. Female players create gendered identities in the game that are constrained by the rules of the game and social relationships. There are also unrecognized possibilities for diverse and alternative performances in gendered role-playing. In contrast to Eklund's approach from a female perspective, Osborne, H. takes the perspective of the whole player and explains that the game environment mediates players' self-expression and acceptance of minority identities [7]. Players who are able to empathize and reflect with the gender and sexual orientation of their characters and feel a sense of belonging within the game structure are able to build positive interpersonal relationships and are able to accept the identities expressed by others. Both bring a degree of innovation to the study of gender in MMORPGs, and the inclusion of feminist theory and sexual orientation exploration both go some way to refining early gender-related online game studies.

4.2. Recent Advances: Discuss the Latest Research and the Shift in Focus over the Years

Around 2015, IGD (Internet Gaming Disorder) is becoming a significant concept in the field of online gaming research, and there has been a longstanding debate about player addiction. IGD research in MMORPGs has been explored as much as in other gaming categories, for example, Lehenbauer-Baum M. and Fohringer M. found that the criteria of cognitive salience and tolerance and euphoria were not applicable to IGD, and that the criteria for distinguishing between high engagement and addiction should be further reconsidered through a data analysis [8].

On the topic of gender swapping and gender equality, more game studies tend to dig into the motivation of swapping and the challenge of switching to potential gender stereotypes and its limitations to be explored [9]. While gender studies on MMORPGs in the last five years have been characterized by diversity and interdisciplinarity. In this paper, the author especially finds research papers with innovative qualities in recent years, which, on the basis of refining the insufficient depth of earlier studies, break the old frameworks and combine gender studies with psychology, behavioral sciences, and cultural criticism, providing new perspectives and research methods and enriching the academic community's understanding of gender studies on MMORPGs.

4.2.1. Gender Temperament

Viewing gender attributes as critical, Kneer, J. et al. explored the effects of gender-related variables (e.g., masculinity and femininity) on players' motivation, enthusiasm, and addictive behaviors in MMORPG games. By analyzing the data, they found that gender traits had a significant effect on almost all variables of interest [10]. Compared to considering only biological sex, gender traits provide valuable information for understanding game-related concepts such as motivation, passion, and problematic game behavior. Evaluating the impact of gender fluidity on the study variables provides a more critical perspective for future MMORPG gender studies.

4.2.2. Psychological Behavior

Evren, Cuneyt et al. assessed the relationship between Loot box engagement and gender, gaming disorder severity, use of MMORPGs, and online gaming motivation, exploring the association of gender-related variables between Loot box engagement and gaming behavior [11]. Their results

showed that a higher percentage of men engaged in Loot box engagement in using microtransactions, purchasing games, spending time on games, playing more games on weekends than on weekdays, being an eSports gamer and/or following eSports, having gaming-related problems, using Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs), the severity of their IGD symptoms, and all six motivations for online gaming. This line of research is relatively rare in established gender studies and provides a new perspective for understanding the relationship between gaming behavior and gender.

4.2.3. Comparative Cultural Studies

Sádlo, P. explores the gender norms of names in the original English version of the MMORPG World of Warcraft in French translation [12]. In the empirical part, the authors analyze the most common names throughout the game and provide explanations about the gendered characteristics of these names in the original and target languages. The article mentions that grammatical sexism is one of the most fascinating aspects shown by linguistic analyses, and in particular, the paper explores in detail the issue of sexism in the English-French translations of games, providing a cross-cultural comparison and analysis of gender expressions in games.

5. Conclusions

Based on the review and synthesis of the above studies, we try to find some potential research directions and suggests the following possible perspectives for future research about gender in MMORPGs:

Gender traits and game motivation: Future research could explore the impact of gender traits on the motivations and goals of different gender players in MMORPG games. For example, the study could focus on the preferences of different gendered players for game motivations such as achievement, social interaction, and exploration, and further explore the relationship between these motivations and game experience and satisfaction.

Impact of game elements on gender and gaming barriers: In-depth research on the impact of specific game elements (e.g., loot boxes, character customization, quest systems, etc.) on the gaming behavior and gaming barriers of players of different genders. Such research can help us understand how specific game elements shape players' gaming experience, engagement and potential risks.

Comparative study of cross-cultural gender expression: A comparative study of gender expression in different MMORPG games in different cultures. Explore the way different cultures interpret and translate gender roles, names and dialogues in the games, so as to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of culture on gender expression in games.

Gender Diversity and Gaming Communities: Focuses on gender diversity and inclusion in MMORPG gaming communities. This includes exploring the experiences, interactions, and social support of gender-diverse players in gaming communities, and examining gaming communities' strategies and practices for promoting gender inclusiveness and resisting gender discrimination.

Game design and gender: Considering the inclusion of gender factors in the design process of MMORPG games could be an interesting area of research. Future research could explore the impact of game design on gender role modeling, task allocation, social interaction and game experience, and suggest specific design principles and recommendations to promote a more inclusive and diverse game experience.

References

- [1] Hsu, S. H., Wen, M.-H., & Wu, M.-C. (2009). Exploring user experiences as predictors of MMORPG addiction. *Computers & Education*, 53(3), 990-999. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2009.05.016
- [2] Hussain, Z., & Griffiths, M. D. (2008). Gender Swapping and Socializing in Cyberspace: An Exploratory Study. *CyberPsychology & Behavior*, 11(1), 47–53. doi:10.1089/cpb.2007.0020
- [3] Wang, S. T., Kuo, W. C., & Yang, J. C. (2011, November). An empirical study on gender switching of MMORPG players. In *Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on Computers in Education (ICCE 2011)*. Chiang Mai, Thailand
- [4] Brehm, A. L. (2013). Navigating the feminine in massively multiplayer online games: gender in *World of Warcraft*. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 4. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00903
- [5] Wang, S. T., Yang, J. C., Chen, S. Y., & Kuo, W. C. (2012). The Clusters of Gaming Behavior in MMORPG: A Case Study in Taiwan. *2012 IIAI International Conference on Advanced Applied Informatics*. doi:10.1109/iiat-aii.2012.60
- [6] Eklund, L. (2011). Doing gender in cyberspace: The performance of gender by female *World of Warcraft* players. *convergence: the International Journal of Research into New Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 17(3), 323-342.
- [7] Osborne, H. (2012). Performing self, performing character: exploring gender performativity in online role-playing games. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 11.
- [8] Lehenbauer-Baum, M., & Fohringer, M. (2015). Towards classification criteria for internet gaming disorder: debunking differences between addiction and high engagement in a German sample of *World of Warcraft* players. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 45, 345-351. doi:10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.098
- [9] Huang, Dianlin, Zhang, Zimeng & Su, Jicong. (2021). Between “him” and “her”: A study of online game players’ gender transformation and identity performance strategies. *Journalism* (09), 34-43. doi:10.15897/j.cnki.cn51-1046/g2.20210818.002.
- [10] Kneer, J., Franken, S., & Reich, S. (2019). Not Only for the (Tom) Boys: Gender Variables as Predictors for Playing Motivations, Passion, and Addiction for MMORPGs. *Simulation & Gaming*, 50(1) , 44-61. doi:10.1177/1046878118823033
- [11] Evren, Cuneyt & Evren, Bilge & Dalbudak, Ercan & Topcu Bulut, Merve & Kutlu, Nilay.(2021). The Relationship of Loot Box Engagement to Gender, Severity of Disordered Gaming, Using MMORPGs, and Motives for Online Gaming. *Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences*. 11. 25. 10.5455/PBS.20200915101516.
- [12] Sádlo, P. (2017). Gender Alternatives in the French Translation of MMORPG *World of Warcraft* in relation to the English Original. *caracteres: Estudios Culturales y Críticos De La Esfera Digital*.