

Chapter 11

Reasons for Avatar Gender Swapping by Online Game Players: A Qualitative Interview–Based Study

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ABSTRACT

Players of massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPG) frequently select avatars of the opposite gender, a phenomenon known as gender swapping. While this phenomenon is widely recognized, little is known about the underlying reasons. This study thus examines why players use opposite-gender avatars. Heterogeneity sampling is used to maximize information completeness. Data are obtained from interviews with 21 MMORPG players in Taiwan. The core theme identified is “increased enjoyment”, which itself integrates six more specific themes or aspects (social interaction, harassment avoidance, obtaining free gifts, fooling others, fantasy experiences and playing superior avatars) through which players derive increased enjoyment from game playing with gender-swapped avatars. This exploratory work creates a foundation for future research to develop and test hypotheses linking gender-swapping with player psychology or behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Online game players have attracted considerable attention in communication studies. Previous studies on gaming have examined player demographics (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003, 2004) and social interactions (Jansz & Martens, 2005, Jansz & Tanis, 2007). Specifically, Hussain and Griffiths (2008) found that 57% of surveyed players had swapped the gender of their game characters (i.e., avatars), while an earlier study by the same investigators (Griffiths et al., 2003) noted that 15.5% of surveyed players had swapped the gender of their *main* characters. Moreover, Griffiths et al. (2003) found that males were more prone to gender swapping than females. To summarize, the above studies agreed that gender-swapping is common in online games.

The reasons for the frequently observed phenomenon of gender swapping remain unclear. Unanswered questions include whether players swap avatar genders to experience being the opposite gender, whether they do so to make opposite gender friends, or whether they have other motivations. Research investigating this issue examines how people use information technologies to communicate with each other. However, few studies have examined reasons for avatar gender swapping by online gamers. The prevalence of and reasons for gender swapping is interesting and worth further study, particularly to understand whether motivations for this behavior differ between males and females.

Therefore, this study investigates the interesting question of why gender swapping occurs in MMORPG.

BACKGROUND

Previous research categorized motivations for playing online games as achievement, social interaction, and immersion (Yee, 2006). Among these motivations, social interaction may be the most relevant to gaming behavior. Social contact was also identified as the main motivation for gaming (Jansz & Martens, 2005). Moreover, social interaction motivation is positively related to player use of online multi-player first person shooting games (Jansz & Tanis, 2007). Since most online game players are male (Griffiths et al., 2003, 2004), female avatars are naturally visually appealing to most players. Male players may thus be motivated to play female avatars to attract attention of other players and benefit from enhanced social interactions, suggesting that gender-swapping is an effective means of increasing satisfaction.

Gender swapping (or gender switching) describes the behavior where an Internet user adopts an opposite gender identity. Gender swapping is facilitated by information technologies which enable users to create gender-swapped identities or avatars. The pioneering study of Bruckman (1993) presented an interesting case study involving a male MUD (multi-user dungeon) player who adopted a female avatar. Playing a female avatar allowed the gender swapper to connect with his female side. The gender swapper gradually became accustomed to assuming a female role in the MUD and a male role in reality. This case study revealed accessing opposite-gender roles as one reason for online gender-swapping behavior. Moreover, the reasons for female players to adopt opposite-gender avatars have rarely been investigated, revealing the need to further address this issue.

Gender-swapping behavior can be enhanced by advanced information technologies. While MUD generally involves only a text-based interface, modern online games or MMORPG (such as, *Lineage* and *World of Warcraft*) use advanced information technologies and have high quality graphical interfaces and sound effects that provide better platforms for gender-swapping behavior. Avatars in online games can be customized in terms of face, dress, and actions, enabling players to display masculinity or femininity.

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