

League of Gendered Game Play Behaviors:
Examining Instrumental vs Identity-Relevant Avatar Choices

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Abstract

Previous research on gender swapping in online games suggests that the relationship between player sex and avatar gender tends to be more instrumental for males and more identity-relevant for females. This article examines this pattern of behavior in *League of Legends* (LoL), currently the most played PC game in North America and Europe (Gaudiosi, July 2012). The analysis is based on anonymized survey responses and linked gameplay server data from over 15,000 players, provided by the game developer. Results yield some typical gendered patterns: male players tend to focus more on combat activities, whereas women focus on more social game activities. Moreover, female players are more likely to choose same-gender avatars than male players are, but females who gender swap engage in more masculine and fewer feminine behaviors. These results are consistent with previous findings and support the general claim that males tend to have an instrumental relationship with their avatars, while females tend to have an identity-relevant relationship. However, one finding contradicts this generalization: male players who rated themselves as shy are more likely to choose female avatars than male players who rated themselves as competitive or bold. This suggests that for some males, identity does play a role in their choice of avatar. Building on these findings, this paper discusses how gender is embodied and represented in similar ways in both real and virtual spaces, situating gender as an ongoing constructed performance.

Extended Abstract

Although there is ample opportunity for gender bending and experimenting in virtual spaces, very little swapping actually happens in MMOGs (Huh & Williams, 2010; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). Most research shows that same gender avatar selection reflects an embodiment of our real world personas in some way (Taylor, 2002). Players do not 'leave the meat behind' (Bell, 2005) per se, and instead construct and perform gender (often their own) in virtual spaces via the characters they create or choose, and how they play and explore the game with these characters and avatars.

In addition to choice of avatar gender, virtual world users often have a choice of activities in which they can engage within the virtual world. MMOG research has shown that men and women do play differently - with a different focus. Broadly, most male players tend to prefer virtual activities that are stereotypically masculine (framed around combat), while most female players tend to prefer virtual activities that are stereotypically feminine (framed around socializing; Yee, 2008).

When there is gender bending, it is usually the male players swapping roles, with no perceivable difference in game-play behaviors from males who use male avatars (Huh & Williams, 2010), thus confirming the notion that males who gender swap do so for reasons besides identity exploration (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008; MacCallum-Stewart, 2008; Yee, 2008). However, although few, female gender swappers have been found to behave in ways that are more masculine and less feminine than females who use female avatars (Huh & Williams, 2010). Overall, this suggests that the relationship between player sex and avatar gender tends to be more instrumental for males and more identity-relevant for females.

This article examines this pattern of behavior in *League of Legends* (LoL), which is a Multiplayer Online Battle Arena (MOBA) action game that pits groups of three or five players against each other, and is currently the most played PC game in North America and Europe (Gaudiosi, July 2012). In most Massively Multitplayer Online Games (MMOGs) a player chooses the character's gender, race and class. LoL is different in that the player chooses a champion that has already been assigned a specific gender and set of traits and skills. While there is less customizability in this MOBA, there were 61 different champions to choose from at the time of data collection, with an approximate gender distribution of 75% male and 25% female. Thus, this article examines the connection between player gender, the kinds of champions that male and female players choose, and how they play LoL with them.

The analysis is based on anonymized survey responses and linked gameplay server data from over 15,000 players, provided by the game developer. A series of T-test, correlation, and regression analyses are used to examine relationships between player sex, survey measures of gendered personality attributes, and behavioral and survey-based indicators of combat versus socially-oriented play (e.g., frequency of killing other players, playing with a romantic partner).

The results yield some typical gendered patterns: male players tend to focus more on combat activities, whereas women focus on more social game activities. Moreover, female players are more likely to choose same-gender avatars than male players are, but females who gender swap engage in more masculine and fewer feminine behaviors. These results are consistent with previous findings and support the general claim that males tend to have an instrumental relationship with their avatars, while females tend to have an identity-relevant relationship. However, one finding contradicts this generalization: male players who rated themselves as shy are more likely to choose female avatars than male players who rated

themselves and competitive or bold. This suggests that for some males, identity does play a role in their choice of avatar. Building on these findings, this paper discusses how gender is embodied and represented in similar ways in both real and virtual spaces, situating gender as an ongoing constructed performance.

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