

Players and the Love Game: Conceptualizing Cheating with Erotic Role Players in *World of Warcraft*

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ABSTRACT

Using data compiled over 9 months of fieldwork, this paper aims to explore how erotic role play in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) has, in some cases challenged and in other cases reinforced, traditional Western concepts of monogamy and fidelity. Data was collected through the use of in-game interviews with self-identified erotic role players on a heavily populated role play server located in the United States. Discussions and analysis aim to revisit and redefine old diametric binaries; from what constitutes cheating and what constitutes fidelity, to when erotic play leaves the screen and enters the biological body. Particularly, the themes to be discussed relate to how players negotiate real life romantic relationships alongside ones in game and how engaging in sex online conflates traditional notions of fidelity.

Keywords

World of Warcraft, role playing, sex online, social relationships

INTRODUCTION

[Caleb] looked at [Megan] again before closing his eyes, his thrusting deep and rhythmic, his strong arms easily lifting him off the bed, moving to pull the deep purple leg back, exposing the sight of his cock pistoning in and out, glimmering with her wetness. [Megan] glared resentfully at the sight of the muscles in the elf's thighs and the scent of her arousal thick in the air. 'Little rat,' she thought, sneering, still moving her bonded leg slightly, 'little rat,' she closed her eyes and inhaled, 'he calls me his shadow cat.' - Excerpt from participant erotic fan fiction.

Infidelity online should come as no surprise to those familiar with dating websites, personal ads, or flirty chatrooms, but many are shocked to discover it also occurs in the most popular massive multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) currently on the market. The data that informs this study was collected, more generally, for a PhD thesis that explores erotic role play in *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard, 2004) as well as traditional, table top role playing games, but one of the unexpected themes to emerge was that erotic role players involved in monogamous relationships outside of the game do not define their sexual activities in the game as cheating. In addition to the usual dialogues of internet infidelity, such as jeopardising real life relationships (Cooper, Delmonico, and Burg 2000) and the potential for sexual liberation and empowerment (Döring 2004), its existence in a game world where it is strictly forbidden by the end user license agreement opens new questions for situating adult play within a larger context of player's agentic abilities to define their play and their relationships.

Before progressing into these discussions, it is important to first define erotic role play (ERP) and cheating and how they will be used within the context of this paper. Erotic role play, in particular, is difficult to define because a widely accepted definition has yet to coalesce. Additionally, many games manufacturers, Blizzard Entertainment included, refuse to even acknowledge player-created sexual behaviour in their games beyond that it is simply against the rules. In the case of *World of Warcraft*, the only time sex is mentioned in conjunction with game play is in Blizzard's *Terms of Use*, in which it is described as content Blizzard deems to be offensive and is strictly forbidden and may result in termination of service. More specifically, it is listed along with other banned topics such as: "...language that is unlawful, harmful, threatening, abusive, harassing, defamatory, vulgar, obscene, hateful, sexually explicit, or racially, ethnically or otherwise objectionable (Blizzard Terms of Use 2010)." For this reason, and simply due to practical similarities in format and style, working definitions of cybersex may help illuminate basic principles of ERP. Cybersex, or 'cybering,' "...can be defined as a social interaction between at least two persons who are exchanging real time digital messages in order to become sexually aroused and satisfied (Döring 2004)." Although convenient, this definition fails to speak to the more peculiar intricacies of role play. As one interview participant pointed out, "Cybering is the exchange of sexually suggestive sentences specifically to sexually excite the other person and yourself. ERP is more of a natural progression of a story line between fictional characters." Perhaps in comparison to dedicated authors of fiction, the great lengths with which certain players go to create and play a role for their character is an important distinguishing factor. Many of the role players in this study spent untold hours developing and creating dynamic characters able to act within the myriad intricacies of everyday life, sex being but one of them.



Figure 1: This visually represents ERP in *World of Warcraft*. While the avatars are not obviously engaged in sexual activity from the perspectives of passersby, they are textually describing their actions in a private chat channel viewable only by them.

When defining cheating, several definitions meet the purposes of this paper. From a traditional, games philosophy perspective, a cheater "...pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still

acknowledges the magic circle (Huizinga 1949, 11).” Although the mention of the magic circle appears to render this definition inappropriate for its purpose, by redefining traditional relationships in terms of play, as relationship therapists in the past have done (Betcher 1987), Huizinga’s definition of the cheater, or rather the false player, becomes a useful tool in studying infidelity. Within the context of a dyadic, monogamous relationship, the cheater pretends to be playing by the rules and boundaries of acceptability established with their partner and often go to great lengths to ensure that the fantasy of the relationship is not disturbed by the revelation of the affair. Likewise, we may choose to look at cheaters, mods, and hackers within a gaming context as players that are unfaithful to the relationship agreements laid out at the start of play. Without breaking into semantics, the more traditional definitions of infidelity are also useful in developing an understanding of the pathologisation psychology uses to differentiate it as abnormal or harmful behaviour. Psychiatrist Frank Pittman writes, “If it is lied about or kept secret, or done over the partner’s objection, then it is infidelity, a betrayal of the marital agreement that the couple would keep their sexual activities within the relationship (qtd. in Rosewarne 2009, 2).” This definition unnecessarily includes marriage as a perimeter, but could easily be extrapolated to include any monogamous, committed relationship. It is useful to situate participants’ experiences of cheating online within the context of these definitions.

DATA COLLECTION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The research that informs this paper began in the autumn of 2010 when the researcher negotiated access to a group of role players, commonly known as a guild, on a heavily populated United States-based *World of Warcraft* server. The guild actively role plays and requires that all members play as their characters, even in battle, at all times. At the time of the study, the guild had 109 individual members. This guild utilises a privately hosted forum for communications outside of the game, including some forum-based role playing. They also have a private ‘adult’ section of the message board specifically for members over the legal age of consent to post erotic fan art and fiction and to also advertise for new ERP partners. It was decided, due to ethical reasons, that participation should never be solicited from individual players directly, but rather via an advertisement posted on the ‘adult’ forums which would provide information about the study. The advertisement contained contact details so that participants could volunteer for a 2 hour long in-game interview done through the game’s private chat system. After 9 months of fieldwork that included participant observation and case studies, there were 14 volunteers for in-depth interviews. Their ages ranged from early twenties to mid-forties with a mean age of 29. In total, 6 of the volunteers identified as men, 7 as women, and one as a male to female pre-op transsexual. Most of the participants live in the United States and Canada, but one lives in Central America. Interestingly, and perhaps data for a future paper, the average age of their first erotic role play experience was 14 years old.

Total Participants	14
Mean age	29
Genders	6 men, 7 women, and 1 male to female transsexual
Location	Mostly North America- the US and Canada, but with one participant living in Central America.
Average age of first ERP experience	14

Table 1: Participant demographics.

After collection, a grounded analysis of the data was conducted. Along with other unexpected themes, cheating was not directly asked about in the interview, but rather emerged out of a natural dialogue with participants. However, one of the primary interview questions asked if the player had ever been in a romantic relationship outside of the game while still ERPing in the game and how they managed

the two relationships. Follow up questions were centred on the amount of disclosure players offered their real life partners about their erotic in-game activities.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Although the majority of the current body of literature on cybersex focuses on the dangers of infidelity, with one study going as far as to state, "...cyberspace creates a cultural climate of permissiveness that actually serves to encourage and validate sexually adulterous and promiscuous behaviour (Young et al 1999, 2)," the respondents in this study who were in, or had been in, a monogamous offline relationship reported being open and honest with their partners about their erotic role play in the game. Respondents were eager to express their agency in framing both their online erotic play and offline committed relationships in their own terms. Participants Megan and Caleb, who opened this paper with an excerpt from an erotic fan fiction story that featured their characters, have been in a relationship together for over ten years and were very open to the guild about their erotic role play with each other. They would often post fan fiction stories centred on their sessions and would additionally share commissioned erotic fan art of their characters. They were, however, less open to discussing the details of ERP sessions that involved third parties. When questioned about how they felt involving others in their play, they were quick to mention that it is not cheating:

Researcher: Why isn't it cheating?

Megan: Well, we're both open about it, firstly.

Caleb: For the same reason I don't consider murdering someone in roleplay murder. That's glib, but also because it's something [Megan] and I discussed and agreed to, we consented to the other doing it and discussed the repercussions.

Megan: Our motivation, as well, is also on each other. We mostly think of ERP with others as 'practice' for one another, a way to tease one another (ie. sending each other the chatlogs) or as a way to get turned on for the other person. So it's hard to see it as cheating when we're doing it to improve upon our own sexual life.

This interview excerpt at once confronts and reinforces traditional understandings of infidelity. By engaging in sexual activities outside of the confines of their relationship, they are breaking the fundamental rule of monogamy. Yet far from subversive, both Megan and Caleb reinforce their relationship commitments by channelling the sexual energies developed by their character's affairs into their bedroom activities, suggesting that their in-game activities are 'practice' and foreplay. In this sense, the experiences of Megan and Caleb are in direct opposition to the typical narrative that surrounds infidelity, which is that it is a selfish act. In an important feminist discussion of the gendered power dynamics at the heart of cheating, Lauren Rosewarne writes, "Having the right to act is often construed as tantamount to permission, if not encouragement (2009, 71)." Rosewarne discusses the 'right to act' in terms of the individual social capital; the scales that balance power in egalitarian relationships are tipped when one partner betrays the trust of the other to meet unsatisfied desires. However, Megan and Caleb manage to avoid leaving each other disadvantaged through their openness and disclosure with each other by sending chatlogs and by disclosing their erotic role play activities to one another by discussions.

Disclosure seemed to be a key theme in how participants mitigated any potential harm to their real life relationships that could come from their erotic play. Many respondents explained that trust and emotional security is a keystone to any healthy relationship and that trusting partners online is no different to trusting them offline, thereby further conflating assumptions of the 'virtual' and 'real' self. One such participant is ODT. ODT is 34 years old and works in a high managerial position for a communications company in the United States. He spoke about his preference to date gamers and role players in real life and said that the issue of cheating through ERP on *World of Warcraft* usually came up during offline relationship discussions. Like Megan and Caleb, ODT erotic role played with his

partner, but also with other people. When questioned whether or not this had become an issue for the relationship, he responded:

ODT: I'm not really the jealous type, so that didn't really get into it. I was comfortable in the fact that I brought the goods in the sack, so I was never worried about cheating/ straying. It's a trust thing really. But you can't have trust if one or the other is insecure.

Researcher: So the fact that it is online or through fictional characters doesn't make cheating any less of an issue?

ODT: I guess I didn't view it that way, it's online, and either I or she was getting turned on, and the other would clearly reap the benefits of that arousal. It's not like one of us was driving off to hotel rooms to fuck the person we erped with.

Echoing some of the sentiments of Megan and Caleb, ODT maintains that as long as the offline partner was reaping the benefits of arousal, the online behaviour stayed safely within the bounds of monogamy. Although this example still centres on both ODT and his partner remaining physically the domains of one another, it calls into question the very definitions of cheating. In ages before the internet, "...the unhappily married men or women might have had to wait for an out-of-town business trip before they could act on their desire, or be forced to try something much more awkward and risky, like holding the glance of the person they desired in front of all the neighbours at the local coffee shop (Orr 2004, 128)." Many researchers have followed this idea that the disembodied process of computer usage has facilitated the ease of infidelity, but if an online affair is never consummated in the flesh, is it still cheating? A paper on the topic compared results of a study measuring attitudes towards offline infidelity with online infidelity and found that respondents were not entirely certain that a partner engaging in cybersex was being unfaithful citing reasons such as: "the interaction was with two people who had never met and did not ever intend to meet, and it could not be infidelity as there was no physical sex taking place (Whitty & Carr 2005, 110)."



Figure 2: ODT's primary character showing his sexual prowess in a loin cloth.

Discussions about the separation of the virtual and the real through placing emphasis on physical action in the flesh importantly cause us to reflect upon our understanding of what infidelity is. Perhaps because the internet as a sexual playground has only existed in Western society's collective imagination for a few decades, there is a cultural lag in general agreement. For one participant who has been married for eight years, even making the decision to explain his in-game erotic activities to his wife was a complicated process.

Researcher: How did you go about discussing ERP with her?

PC: It wasn't easy. I wasn't open about it at first. She knew that I RPed, but there was an issue when I allowed things at the beginning of my RP "career" on wow when things bled over into OOC with another player. Luckily, I was able to collar that and never allow it to happen again. I decided I needed to be honest with my wife about how I spent my time in the game, and explained to her that my characters had relationships, and that sometimes that meant that there were erotic themes taking place.

Researcher: If it's not too personal, how did you manage the 'bleeding?' Or, if that question is a bit much, how do you ensure things stay in character now?

PC: Well it's much like in real life. Things started innocently enough with private ooc conversation with a flirtation here and there, then escalated quickly to more. I had to cut off contact with that person completely to make sure that the problem was stamped out. Now, I am just very careful with how far I let my flirtatious nature go

Researcher: If it's not too personal, how did your wife react when you told her?

PC: Well, when she discovered it first she was deeply disturbed. She thought that I was cheating on her with someone over the internet. When I sat down with her in honesty though and explained to her what RP was and how ERP fit into that, she was alright.

This player interestingly reflects on his wife's reactions to his in-game behaviour as a misunderstanding. He attributes her deep disturbance at his online interactions as her lack of knowledge of role play's seemingly natural progression into erotic play even though he initially expressed some regret and guilt about his online relationship as expressed by his decision to 'collar it.' The 'bleeding' of in character and out of character (OOC) relationships that PC describes has been mentioned as a natural progression of internet relationships in the literature. One study focusing on how cybersex often develops into a deeper emotional attachment postulated, "As important internet relationships are integrated into one's identity, people are also motivated to make these important new relationships a social reality by making them public and face-to-face (McKenna et al 2001, 310)." So although PC did not feel his in-character actions made him unfaithful to his wife, there is a strong argument that he and his ERP partner were both willing to take their erotic play a step further by involving themselves in out of character flirtatious communication. If PC and his partner were happy with their online interactions, the question of why they decided to stop arises. Much research into how 'good' people often find themselves in an affair points to the idea of compartmentalisation. "For most participating partners, an affair does create inner conflict. It is inconsistent with their values... with how they see themselves... and shutting out thoughts of their marriage when with their affair partner is often the only way of emotionally managing the conflict (Snyder et al 2007, 223)." This type of emotional boundary maintenance is conflated further when it occurs online since, as the examples in this study have shown, there is little agreement on how far is too far in the exchange of flirtatious text.

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

From the interview abstracts presented in this paper, a few important observations emerge that can increase our understanding of not only how some *World of Warcraft* role players are engaging in sex in the game, but also how they are making sense of their actions in a real-world context. Much of current research and literature seems to be focused on either benefits or penalties that can be gained

from engaging in a social format that disembodies its users, but rarely is the user-experience examined as a whole without emphasis on the dichotomy that separates mind and body, virtual and real, and physical and imagined. As one scholar studying chat room cybersex wrote, "In essence, these arguments, condemnatory and celebratory alike, are predicated on the conviction that there is a radical disjuncture between experiences in the physical world and those found in cyberspace (Campbell 2004, 5)." Online sexuality causes a conflation of these widely accepted dichotomies and forces us to re-examine assumptions about what sexuality, in all its myriad varieties, and by proxy, what is cheating, infidelity, and monogamy. Although further exploration of these themes is needed, this paper has offered some examples of how within an online game setting, individual players are creating and making their own definitions and rules for fidelity.

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