

Attention whore! Perception of female players who identify themselves as women in the communities of MMOs

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ABSTRACT

Despite the expansion of the gaming industry, its public remains overwhelmingly male in MMOs (Massive Multiplayer Online) games. The objective of this research is to explore the perceptions of players regarding self-identification as women in MMOs. The aim was to know: (i) how women identify themselves online (both as avatars and in virtual communities, such as forums), (ii) if there is fear of being identified as a woman, and (iii) if there are experiences of aggression and / or courtship from male players. The research included an online questionnaire with 21 questions about the experiences of female players that was posted as a link in virtual communities about games. The sample was composed of 120 self-identified Brazilian female players of MMOs with an average age of the players is 22 years. Most of the players were from the Southeast of Brazil, and have played MMOs for 6 to 10 years. Most players said that they have no problem revealing their gender and think that MMO communities are mostly receptive to them. Most of them play with female avatars (89%), and say that the experience is pleasurable (33%); 36% report that they were courted once at least while gaming. Despite reporting that their experiences playing games is pleasurable, there is still a differentiation of treatment for female avatars: 43.5% of the players say they realize their faults are being implicitly assigned to their gender and 38% report having experienced situations in which they were required to date another player. As for the experience of aggression, 23% reported that this has already occurred, but rarely. The results show that although there is no explicit prejudice, women still feel they are not treated as equals.

Keywords

Woman and games; gendered virtual environment; multi massive online games; MMOs; MMORPGs

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INTRODUCTION

Videogames are an expanding media. With the rise of new technologies, there are new possibilities for the games industry to attract new and more diverse customers. Still, this media is perceived as a man's world even though, according to ESA, the female audience represents up to 47% of videogame players – a number that keeps growing. Despite the stereotype that a “real gamer” is a teenager boy, nowadays women do play games, but they vary considerably as a group in playing time, favorite genres and particular interests or reasons for gaming. Some women prefer to play casual games, on PCs and/or mobile devices, and they usually do not consider themselves as gamers. There are also “grrl gamers”, that play console games, games like First Person Shooters and MMOGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Games). Although there are women that play these games, they still face sexist behavior from male players.

In Brazil, there are 80 million Internet users and 61 million play some sort of game and 47% of players are women. Half of the female players (51%) belong to the upper middle class and are aged between 40 and 49 years; 55% are casual players and most of them (77%) use social network games; only 6% play MMOs games. Campello de Souza *et al.* found, in a sample of 1,280 Brazilian high school students, approximately 74.7% of the students who declared they play MMORPGs were male.

Previous literature has explored reasons why women play fewer games considered “core”: different preferences; absence of women designers in the games industry; negative or hyper-sexualized representations of female characters in videogames; design and production of games doing by males and for males; less leisure time; games with gender stereotypes. Scholars indicate that some of the gender-based research has problems, such as leaving out of studies important aspects like age, socioeconomic status, previous experience with video games, maintenance of the feminine stereotypes, and sexual orientation.

More women are playing MMOGs. Some authors indicate that women are attracted by its affordances which allow women to hide or emphasize their gender, and/or socialize and play without a defined goal. Taylor argued that the increasing number of women playing MMOGs is because these games provide a sense of community and social structure. Taylor also has claimed that socialization tools such as chat and online forums are particularly favored by women, giving them multiple sites of pleasure when playing MMOGs.

For female gamers, the anonymity of using an avatar provides the opportunity to compete against male opponents. The game allows to choose a avatar that can be male or female, but people cannot be sure who is controlling it, what can reduce stereotypical behavior towards female gamers. Although women can hide their gender, revealing to be a woman in an online game community can be disheartening: female players who choose to reveal their gender are often doubted or belittled (Wiseheart, 2009).

MMOGs are still perceived as a male environment, and the presence of female players seems to cause surprise or even shock male players. Among common reactions, there is the disbelief that there is actually a woman behind the avatar, which may happen because there is gender swapping. Yee *et al.* (2011) states that, among men, 55.3% had a character of the female gender, and 29.3% had a female character as their primary character, while among women 18.5% had at least one male character, and only 7.5% had a male character as the primary one.

Another possible reaction to the discovery that the person behind the avatar in a game is female is verbal aggression, since many players seem to think that the gaming community is no place for woman. “Attention whore!” is a sentence many women hear when they claim to be woman. Many of them have stories about being verbally abused, for example, “woman don’t know how to play,” “go back to the kitchen,” “you shouldn’t be here,” and/or sexual advances and threats .

Acknowledging and documenting the insults and threats that women receive while playing games has gained prominence through websites dedicated to just that. The website Fat, Ugly or Slutty (<http://www.fatuglyorslutty.com>) gathers examples of abuse and harassment. And the Extra Credits crew was recently invited by Microsoft to talk about and build strategies to fight against online gaming offenders. This “trash-talking” may discourage many females from playing, although some women have no problem embracing it . Many female players therefore hide their gender, sometimes using male characters .

Another myth about female players of MMOGs is the belief that women aren’t there to play, but to find a boyfriend. Many believe that girls cannot enjoy playing these games, and they are “Fake Gamers”. Male players assume that they only play to spend time with a male significant other (Wiseheart, 2009). Schiano *et al.* (2011) found that, among Europe, Taiwan and the United States of America the amount of female players in the MMORPG World of Warcraft matches or exceeds 24% of the playing population. Most identified themselves as casual or moderate players (7% at Europe and 9% at the USA) and were more likely than man to play with a spouse or partner (72% vs. 31% at the USA).

It is also quite common to hear about players who are constantly invited, and sometimes even coerced, into relationships with male avatars. Female players are perceived as potential partners, both online and offline. Some women feel this is harassment, since they say that they like to play to enjoy themselves, not to look for a lover. Others feel that kind of attention is a compliment, and enjoy the attention they get from male players . Whereas male players help female avatars in online worlds, the latter are often the object of banter and flirts .

Some authors, like Yee , argue that the negativity aimed at female players by some male players originate in the hyper-masculine culture that prevails in gaming communities. This culture builds barriers that make it hard to increase the amount of female players, since it usually comes along with an hostile attitude towards women. While MMOGs seem to be a safe place from gendered expectations, they often reinforce stereotypes by limiting the ways in which it is “acceptable” for a female to play .

Aiming to explore some of the points Yee (2008) reveals about gaming communities, we decided to research how women players felt in MMOGs in Brazil. This paper’s aim is to understand what their perceptions are, especially when it comes to the reactions towards identifying themselves as women in MMOs. To do so, we focus on how women players identify themselves online (within or outside the game, as in online forums), if they feel reticent towards being pointed out as a woman and if they ever experienced courtship or abuse related to their sex.

METHOD

An Internet-based survey was conducted from May 30th to July 1st, 2012, with a sample of Brazilian online female gamers. The survey was announced in different social networks (especially in communities with videogame themes, like “Boteco Gamer” and “Videogames Brasil” in Facebook), and in Brazilian communities focused on women who play online games, (like “WOWGirls” and “Girls of War”). The message sent had a short invitation for participation and a link to the online survey. After providing informed consent, the participants were directed to the content of the survey.

The authors did not gather information about the ethnics of the population. This was due to the complexity of ethnics on Brazil, where the population is racially mixed - which makes ethnic identity data harder to gather. Future researches shall try to investigate this data properly.

Respondents answered an online questionnaire consisting in 21 multiple-choice questions and 2 open questions. We expected to gather information on: 1) the demographics of female players (age, degree, profession, location, favorite game type); 2) how a woman identifies herself online in games and communities; 3) experiences of abuse and courtship; 4) feelings and impressions of female players towards the experience of being a woman who identifies herself as one online.

We understand that there are many ways a woman may reveal her gender online, like the use of a female avatar and/or a female name, the use of a microphone during play or/and the use of photos and female names in online forums. The survey also gathered information related to courtship and abuse, since studies usually point out those behaviors as specifically associated with a person's gender, and it also tried to cover the use of (or not) male avatars, since other studies (MacCallum-Stewart, 2008) have shown female players sometimes play as males to hide their sex.

RESULTS

Demographics

The sample comprised 120 subjects. The average age was 22 years old, and most were between 18 and 23 years old (54%). All were Brazilian. Only 72 participants specified their location, most of them (74%) living in Brazil's Southeast area. Regarding occupation, 46% were students and among those with jobs, most worked with information technology (21%).

Most of the participants had been playing videogames for a long time: 39% of players for 6 to 10 years and 26% for more than 10 years. Participants reported that their favorite game was the RPG (67.5%), followed by the First Person Shooter (19%) and strategy games (12%).

Identifying as a woman in gaming communities

Avatar nickname

When it comes to the avatar name, most women in our sample reported that they do not mind revealing their gender, either by picking a female name (44%) or something similar to their real name (16%).

	n	% total
Something related to my name	19	16%
Name that reveals my gender	53	44%
Name that denies my gender	23	19%
Gender-neutral name	25	21%
Total	120	100

Table 1: Avatar nickname

Avatar's gender

Most of the players reported that they preferred playing as a female avatar (89%).

Experience with female avatar

Of those participants who reported playing with a female avatar, most indicated they have a pleasant experience playing with that avatar. However, 59% reveal experiencing some sort of trouble along the way, even though they consider the majority of their experiences positive. This sort of trouble might have been abuse (23%) or courtship (36%).

	n	% total
Pleasant, without problems	40	33%
Mostly pleasant, but dealt with romantic advances	43	36%
Mostly pleasant, but dealt with aggressive behavior	27	23%
Unpleasant. Dealt with romantic advances or aggressive behavior frequently	4	3%
N/I	6	5%
Total	120	100%

Table 2: Avatar Gender

Choosing a male avatar

Only 12 women (11%) said they rather play as a male avatar.

Reasons for choosing a male avatar

This question allowed the players to write their reasons for the use of male avatars, and answers actually varied a lot. Some reported simply preferring male avatars, others enjoy the male figure better, while some said that the game doesn't offer an option to pick a female avatar in the game (usually First Person Shooters). Only three women said their choice for a male avatar is a strategy to hide their gender. As one of them claims:

“Sometimes, the male avatar has more advantages. We can also avoid some possible conflict. There are many (male) players who are stupid and prejudiced and can’t take the fact some girls can be as good as (or even better than) them.” (subject 12)

Overall, it seems only a few users pick a male avatar and it is usually for other reasons than avoiding treatment.

Avatar used on online forums

It’s interesting to note that 38% of the players who answered this survey do not engage in online forums. The others who do so seem to avoid revealing their sex as female, since only 22.5% use some sort of avatar that could reveal them as female.

	N	% total
Picture of herself	18	15%
Image that reveals gender	27	22.5%
Image that denies gender	14	11.5%
Gender-neutral avatar	15	12.5%
I don’t engage on online forums	46	38.5%
Total	120	100%

Table 3: Forum’s Avatar

It should be taken into consideration that there are no published statistics about the use of games forums by Brazilian players, which makes it hard to understand if this behavior could be related to gender, or if it’s a common thing to Brazilian players in general.

Microphone

When it comes to the use of the microphone, 57% of the women who answered the survey said they do not use it. Reasons given for not using this equipment were a preference for the chat tool, because they consider that communication through sound could take away their concentration from the game; being ashamed of their voices; and being shy. Three players reported using the microphone only when they know who they are playing with, or when the other players seem to be pleasant. Nine participants said that they do not own a microphone and only five players report that they avoid using it for fear of other players finding out they are women.

Among those who use the microphone, most find the experience to be pleasant and without troubles (47%); 34% report to have dealt with romantic advances, but still find the experience of using the equipment to be mostly pleasant, while 15% also find the experience to be mostly fine, but experienced some abuse. Two players reported to have an unpleasant experience within the game, being either heavily courted or verbally abused while using the equipment.

Experiences of abuse or courting

Experiences of being target of aggressive behavior at online games

	N	% total
It happened to me, but only a few times	41	34%
It happened to me, many times	3	2.5%
It never happened to me	76	63.5%
Total	120	100%

Table 4: Aggressive Behavior Experiences

Most players say they've never experienced any kind of abuse while playing (63.5%), however, 34% reported experiencing some sort of aggressive behavior.

Mention/Threats of rape in online games

On websites like Fat, Ugly or Slutty (<http://www.fatuglyorslutty.com>), it's quite common to see messages with rape threats or sexual abuse, towards both the player and their avatar. Considering this is a threat that is especially scary for woman, with sexual violence being quite gendered, it felt important to check if these threats are also commonly received by Brazilian female players. In our sample, 76% said they never heard any mention of rape while playing online games.

	n	% total
No, I never heard of it	91	76.5%
Yes, but it did not make me uncomfortable	9	7.5%
Yes, and it made me uncomfortable	20	16.5%
Total	120	100%

Table 5: Rape Threats

Nonetheless, 16% of the players reported to have heard this sort of threat and feeling uncomfortable with it, which means that, although not that frequent, this situation still happens. One of the players comments:

"I was playing Ragnarok with a female character. I was talking with some friends of mine (all female) in the game. There were four of us, sitting right at the main city, waiting for a special event. Four male players appeared behind us and start following us: every time we sat, they'd sit and get up repeatedly, trying to simulate rape, while making jokes." (subject 25)

Experiences of abuse in online games

It's interesting to note that in the open question aimed to allow the players to vent about their experiences with abuse from male players, at least six women used it to express how

welcome they were, sometimes saying they felt like were treated better than men because of their sex. Some seemed worried and dedicated their answer to denying or justifying aggressive behavior within the community, sometimes questioning the motives behind this study.

Many others had negative experiences to share. Eight participants mentioned verbal abuse and four were stalked and harassed. Among the offenses, some say there were often called “shemales”, implying they were hiding their gender. One woman reports a man got so offended when she claimed to be a woman that he started swearing and accusing her of being a liar. Another eight women mention the disbelief when they reveal their sex, painting those situations as comic and funny.

Experiences of courting

In the previous question, many players used this opportunity to share not aggression stories, but stories of excessive care and of romantic advances. These experiences were felt as both positive and negative by the participants. They felt positive when the player benefited from the interaction through gifts, experience points and access to clans. As one player put it:

“I never had troubles in online games. Generally, since I’m a girl, players would treat me better, and I’d take advantage of that.” (subject 8)

But many female players do not like being helped and given things. As table 2 indicates, when it comes to the use of the female avatar, 36% report their playing experience is not completely pleasant, because they have to deal with frequent romantic advances. When it comes to the microphone use, 34% report experiencing courtship from male players when they identify their gender.

As another player puts it:

“There have been situations where boys kept asking me to add them at social networks, the Microsoft messenger (MSN), sometimes damaging my player when I said no (many times)”. (subject 109)

Evaluating the experience of identifying oneself as a women in the gaming community

Relationship with the gaming community

Women seem to feel that they are welcome at gaming communities. In that way, 80% of them believe that men like the presence of female gamers in MMOs, with some exceptions.

	n	% total
Mostly welcoming, with some exceptions	96	80%

Mostly aggressive and unwelcoming with some exceptions	9	7.5%
Completely welcoming	15	12.5%
Completely unwelcoming	0	0%
Total	120	100%

Table 6: How welcoming is the community

Relating failure to gender

	n	% total
When I fail/make a mistake, other players relate that to my gender	52	43.5%
When I fail/make a mistake, other players think it's because I'm not good at the game, not relating it to my gender	68	56.5%
Total	120	100%

Table 7: Relating failure to gender

This question shows some relevant data. Despite pointing out the community is receptive, a large percentage of players (43.5%) believe men place the female player's failures as attributable to their sex. As one participant puts it:

"I've been through some bad situations, but it was related to the game, not to my gender. When the arguing started to heat up a bit, I'd always feel this implicit idea: 'it's because you are a woman'. Sometimes their silence speaks louder than words." (subject 55)

This "implied idea" points out the difficulties women face in gaming communities. There is a perception that, in gaming, women are perceived as less capable. Even if not explicitly stated, this is something many players seem to notice, which contradicts the discourse that women are well received and accepted.

DISCUSSION

Generally, the Brazilian gaming community is receptive towards female players, although there are some exceptions. For example, it is significant that 43.5% of the players feel their faults are attributed to their sex. This data contradicts the feeling of being welcomed. It feels like there's a silent undeclared prejudice towards them. This player's words might bring some light to the subject:

"About question 16, I never noticed any players necessarily tying my failures to the fact that I'm a woman. Still, every time I make a mistake or my character dies, it goes through my mind that I might be reinforcing the stereotypes about women gamers. In fact, as a woman, I feel more ashamed to fail and more pressured to prove that I can be as much a good player as men." (Subject 118)

Despite feeling welcomed, almost half of the women who responded to our survey feel their failures are seen as connected to their sex. It is, as the player points out, as if they had to prove their abilities to be accepted. But this happens silently. Even when there is no explicit negative feedback coming from the male players, women still feel that this is not their place.

There seems to be no fear of playing as a female: the players in our sample use female avatars, own a nickname that reveals their sex in game forums, and most of the players prefer using a female avatar (89%). It is interesting to think that, according to Yee (2008), 97% of women players have a female character as their most played one, which might suggest that Brazilian women are more likely to sex-swap their avatars. Still, it is not possible to know this for sure, since Yee's research focused on an RPG, in which both male and female avatars are usually available, while our research includes First Person Shooters and Strategy games, which have male characters as their default option. Further research would be needed to understand when, how and under what conditions female Brazilian players sex-swap their avatars. However, 57% do not use microphone, which could act as "real proof" of their gender. It is interesting to see that, although Yee shows that US women use less VoIP tools than their male counterparts, and the usage of the microphone by Brazilian women is about 20% smaller than the average US female player. Some possible explanations might be that computer equipment is more expensive in Brazil, and the use of microphones and VoIP usually requires a fast and stable Internet connection - which is not available throughout the whole country.

CONCLUSION

This small-scale study of Brazilian female players showed that aggression in MMOGs is present, but not necessarily frequent as 63% have never experienced harassment. Experiencing romantic advances seems to happen much more in participants' gaming lives, but it does not make gaming unbearable or less enjoyable to them.

Being courted is one of the ways women are treated differently than man as Yee (2008) pointed out. Courting in gaming often includes giving items to female players or offering help even when unrequested, a behavior some authors call benevolent sexism, a counterpart to hostile sexism. Hall and Canterberry show that many women believe that men who practice benevolent sexism are not likely to also practice hostile sexism. But the quote of subject 109 may suggest this idea wrong, for, when she denies them the attention they may feel entitled to, all the free items and sweet approaches seem to be replaced by aggressive behavior.

It is important to note that the Brazilian culture is deeply rooted in the idea of miscegenation, in which flourishes the thought that everyone is at the same social level, no matter how different they are, making privileges or prejudices seem "impossible". Brazil has also built an amicable culture, which avoids conflict and in which taking a stand is not usually as valued as not taking part in confrontations. Both racism and sexism are often almost invisible, being implicit rather than explicit. Although no one might say sexist remarks out loud, the message is there, making female players warier of making mistakes. An implicit discrimination might be harder to fight against, for it may seem to be a non-existent threat.

It might also be important to take into account the fact that Brazilian male players are often considered more verbally aggressive even among themselves than male players

from most countries. At the time of this publication, we could not find any specific research on that, but it is a kind of common sense understanding in game communities and even mentioned by some of our subjects in the open question.

We know our study had limitations. One of them is the fact that some games make it possible to have more than one character, so players could have both male and female avatars on the same account, which was not covered in our survey. Yee (2006) points out that the average player has about 8.7 characters in their accounts, which shows a significant need to look at the differences between experiences with main characters and secondary characters. Although we point to a preference towards the use of the female avatar, we did not distinguish between main characters and secondary characters, which is a suggested line of inquiry for future studies. We also faced the limitation of using an online only resource, which may make it harder to have a deeper approach to the subject.

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