

## Chapter 28

# Constructing and Deconstructing Gender in Second Life

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### ABSTRACT

*Digital games are cultural representations that convey the gender system. The narratives of gender that have shaped the gaming industry since the 1980s were influenced by gender stereotypes. The representation of the female, although based on stereotypes, has evolved hand in hand with the representation of women in other media. But what happens when players are given the opportunity to develop their digital representatives? Virtual worlds are among the online games that allow a higher degree of personalization of the avatar and, in order to contribute to a better understanding of how gender identities are being performed within these environments, this paper will present a case study of Second Life. A qualitative methodology was used based on netnographic research. The data collection methods included participant observation and auto-netnography. The researchers would like to propose that to examine how gender is represented in games that enable the creation of the avatar allows to deepen the analysis on the relationship that has been established between gender and digital games.*

### INTRODUCTION

Digital games are one of the new media that has most attracted the attention of users worldwide, and over the decades, one has witnessed its transformation from a subculture to a central element of popular culture. Due to the growing importance of digital games for the contemporary entertainment practices, it becomes increasingly necessary to understand them as interactive media that offer players the ability to feel immersed within an alternative space, where the constraints of being human can be mitigated. From

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-1933-1.ch028

the combination man-machine comes the opportunity to reinvent oneself, even though this reinvention may be limited by the storyworld of a given game.

Digital games are cultural representations that convey the gender system. The digital media made available new modes of production and access, new business models, and new cultural narratives, but to what extent did it transformed gender representation? If the digital environment is more and more relevant for human experience, then one has to read gender in light of this context and of the negotiations that occur within it.

The narratives of gender that have shaped the gaming industry since the 1980s are highly influenced by gender stereotypes. Initially, feminine is associated with cuteness, like the case of Ms. Pac-Man that is similar to Pac-Man but has a bow and make-up that evinces her eyes and lips. Another typical role represented by the few female characters present in games at that time is the one of 'damsel in distress', like the cases of Princess Peach, from *Super Mario Bros.*, or Princess Zelda, from *The Legend of Zelda*. The first game, commercially well succeeded, having a female protagonist is *Tomb Raider*. Nevertheless, Lara Croft is also a stereotyped representation of the feminine, despite conveying a different cultural narrative. Lara Croft is not a fragile figure waiting for a hero to rescue her, she is an independent and strong character, but she represents the stereotyped feminine body – she is a sexy heroine with revealing shorts and top. Nowadays there are a growing number of female protagonists and their role in the narrative evolved much since the traditional 'damsel in distress' representation. The representation of the female, although based on stereotypes, has evolved hand in hand with the representation of women in other media – the twenty-first-century woman is strong and independent, but retains a feminine appearance. But what happens when players are given the opportunity to develop their own digital representatives? Does the representation of gender, and particularly of women, change when players create their own characters?

Virtual worlds are among the online games that allow a higher degree of personalization of the avatar and, in order to contribute to a better understanding of how gender identities are being performed within this digital environments, this paper will present a case study of *Second Life*, a sandbox digital game within which players construct their own avatars almost from scratch.

A qualitative methodology is used based on netnographic research (Kozinets 1998, 2002, 2006, 2010). The data collection methods includes participant observation and auto-netnography. The data collected is analyzed through an inductive approach.

The researchers would like to propose that to examine how gender is represented in games that enable the creation of the avatar allows us to deepen the analysis on the relationship that has been established between gender and digital games. In order to fulfil the established goal, the first step will be to analyze the role of avatars as players' digital representatives; then attention will be paid to the social role of gender stereotypes; and finally the case study of the construction of gendered identities with *Second Life* will be presented.

## **Avatar: A Digital Representative**

The avatar represents a new form of expressing oneself. These digital creatures that inhabit a great part of virtual environments allow human beings to extend their existence into computer-mediated spaces. The presence of avatars in these new social spaces reveals the users' will of transcending 'physical reality' and intrinsic biological constraints (Heim, 1993). Within these digital environments users have the possibility of performing a different social role, and in most cases, they have the opportunity to define their appearance.

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