World of Maskcraft vs. World of Queercraft? Communication, sex and gender in the online role-playing game World of Warcraft

Christian Schmieder Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg (Germany)

Abstract
This article examines the construction, representation and commingling of gender identity in the online role-playing game (RPG) World of Warcraft. I show how players on German-speaking non-RPG servers blend gender by using linguistic markers of gender (like specific articles and suffixes) in an interchangeable way. Subsequent to this analysis, possible consequences for the online world as an opposition to ‘offline reality’ and as a space for negotiation of gender identity are discussed. Focusing on different modes of communication while playing, I develop a more differentiated view on communication, sex and gender in online communities – a view that goes beyond an assumption of simplistic, one-dimensional gender bending.

Introduction
In this article, I first describe the stereotyped visual bipolarity of game characters in World of Warcraft. Since communication via visual appearance is only one among many modes of communication in the gaming process, I then dwell on text-based and auditory channels of communication used while playing.

Based upon this analysis, I have structured the visual communication, the communication in in-game written chats, the communication on players’ websites/guild forums and the voice chat communication (e.g. via Teamspeak) into a schematic model of the interactional cosmos in World of Warcraft. These channels offer different spaces for communicating gender as well as providing different levels of anonymity. At the same time, the visual communication and the voice chat communication suggest, at first glance, unambiguous interpretations of gender through stereotypically composed game characters and the audible voices of other players.

What happens in a communicative space in which a tension pulsates between communicative freedom and restrictive gender bipolarity provided by exaggerated game graphics and unambiguously interpreted voice input? Two viewpoints are finally discussed: can the category ‘gender’ dissolve in this tension, can gender-free spaces for communication evolve, in the form...
of a World of QueerCraft? Or can players (especially male) only toy with gender because they re-establish their masculinity while communicating? Are hetero-normative spaces and ideas of normality reinforced behind a masquerade of genders? Is there in fact a World of MaskCraft arising in the communicative cosmos of World of Warcraft?

1. State of research

Specific academic literature on World of Warcraft can be found starting from 2006. Due to the game’s worldwide success, massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) have become more interesting for researchers in the last few years, resulting in the publication of a variety of academic articles. In May 2008, the MIT Press published an anthology dedicated to World of Warcraft: Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader, edited by Hilde G. Corneliussen and Jill Walker Rettberg. This anthology contains a broad variety of articles dedicated to essential issues such as gaming culture, identity, gaming experience and the creation of online worlds.

Nicolas Ducheneaut et al. (2006a) provide a well-founded overview on the gameplay in World of Warcraft; Dmitri Williams et al. (2006) and Nicolas Ducheneaut et al. (2007) scrutinize guilds in World of Warcraft; Ducheneaut et al. (2006b) and T.L. Taylor (2007) explore social dynamics such as team play and the impact of surveillance modes. Marlin Bates discusses the origins of creature races and concepts of the monstrous in World of Warcraft (Bates 2006). Valuable information on a variety of MMORPG-related issues such as demographics, gender bending and communication can be found in Nick Yee’s publications (Yee 2005; 2006a; 2006b; 2007; 2008a; 2008b).


Also, communication in massively multiplayer online games (MMOs) has been analysed by a multitude of authors: an anthology on virtual interaction of comprehensive range was edited by Lars Qvortrup in 2001; Eva-Lotta Sallnäs (2002) compares different media of communication in online worlds; Constance Steinkuehler (2003, 2004, 2006) mainly scrutinizes discursive communication in MMOs based on text; Constance Steinkuehler and Dmitri Williams (2006) show how MMOs open new spaces for informal sociability and Taylor (2007) discusses issues of chat communication in World of Warcraft. Finally, Guido Heinecke (2007) has
composed an excellent contribution, including a list of common vocabulary, on chat communication on German-speaking World of Warcraft servers.

My findings on sex/gender and communication in World of Warcraft are not solely based on literature and collected data. Over the course of two years, I played World of Warcraft (including the expansion Burning Crusade) on a German non-RPG server (player versus environment) for approximately 2500 hours; during this time, I became closely acquainted with the game environment as well as the gamer’s habits of organization and communication on this and other servers.  

2. World of Warcraft: the game

World of Warcraft, released in Europe in spring 2005, is a so-called online role-playing game: a game in which the players are connected via the Internet and populate a shared game environment. With approximately ten million active licences at the beginning of 2008 (Woodcock 2008a), World of Warcraft is by far the world’s most successful subscription-based MMORPG. Bruce Woodcock (2008b) calculates that all subscription-based MMORPGs (including World of Warcraft) accumulate 16 million active licences.

The game itself, programmed and published by the company Blizzard Entertainment, consists of enormous virtual worlds (‘realms’ or ‘servers’), in which thousands of gamers play at the same time. The players control humanoid characters, also called ‘avatars’. These characters possess classic features derived from the tradition of role-playing games. There are classes of characters that heal others (‘healer’), classes that mainly deal in damage (‘damage dealer’) and classes that endure a great deal in order to block enemies from harming more vulnerable characters (‘tanks’).

First and foremost, World of Warcraft is a battle game – fighting computer-controlled enemies is the preference of most players, but the game also provides the option to battle against other human players. In most cases, the players are not lone warriors. They generally play in small groups (‘parties’) or in bigger formations (‘raids’), which can contain up to 40 players. An important motivation for most players lies in having the chance to win valuable, sometimes rare equipment pieces for their characters. The majority of equipment is left behind by defeated foes. In many cases, it is common to role the dice in order to distribute the loot in the group – World of Warcraft involves an element of luck.

However, the game environment provides more possibilities for playing than just fighting: players can accumulate money for better equipment by selling goods to other players; the highly frequented ‘auction houses’ are marketplaces where many players literally speculate with wares. Furthermore, every character can master several crafts (‘professions’) such as mining, tailoring or jewel crafting. In order to pursue these occupations by crafting valuable equipment, players have to collect, eke out, trade or buy resources and trade goods.

Large parts of the game require considerable coordination: in a raid, for example, the character classes have to be represented in a balance and all players have to know what to do while fighting. In order to accomplish the necessary coordination, players establish guilds. In these collectives, the
players form chains of command for raids, organize the distribution of the loot, and hoard and share resources in the guild bank.

*World of Warcraft* offers different types of game environments, each matching players' different expectations of the gameplay: main emphases are put on matches between human players, the search for valuable items or on the masquerading as fantasy characters. On player versus player (PvP) servers the main interest lies in fighting other players; on player versus environment (PvE) servers the main interest is to fight computer-controlled enemies that can be looted for valuable items. The PvP and PvE servers also exist as special role-play gaming (‘RPG’) realms. In these realms, the players can (and must!) assume a character in order to play, and they must obey more restrictive roles of communication (see also Heinecke 2007: 35–37); this includes both topics and ways of speaking. For instance, players are not supposed to talk about the last soccer match in the public text chats. Also, a certain ‘medieval’ way of talking is expected (Blizzard 2008). Non-compliance with these rules is controlled and punished, for example, by temporary exclusion from the game. In total, there are fewer RPG servers than non-RPG servers; the majority of players prefer non-RPG worlds. Providing these options, the different game environments cover Roger Caillois’ classic game categories: *agon* (competition: PvP), *alea* (luck: PvE) and *mimicry* (masquerade: role-play gaming worlds) (Caillois 1960: 19–32, 46).

The playing experience on an RPG server differs strongly from the playing experience on a non-RPG server, because players in role-playing realms passionately and intentionally play their fantasy roles. In this paper, however, I want to examine closely the relationship between game character (or ‘avatar’) and player in a game environment, in which *mimicry* does not stand in the foreground – but is part of a web of tension and communication. When speaking of the game *World of Warcraft* in the following, I intentionally speak of the game and the game experience on non-RPG servers.

3. *World of SexCraft*: visual communication of sex

At first glance, sex seems to play an oppressive role in *World of Warcraft*. Immediately, when choosing their characters, players have to decide whether they want to play a male or a female character. Regardless if one is playing a human, a dwarf, an undead or one of the cow-like taurens, male characters are bigger and more strongly built, especially around the torso – whereas female characters are more delicate and show articulate breast curves. Each race features two sexes, and gamers can choose between some variations concerning the face and hairstyle. However, they cannot change the bodies themselves. The statures are standardized, so one cannot design a delicate male character or a massive female character.

This standardization of sexual representation has evolved from a process of decision making; Taylor (2003b) elaborates processes like this in her article dedicated to design decisions in virtual environments:

> The underlying structure of virtual worlds as expressed in software does not simply appear by magic, though it may at times certainly seem like such to the user. … Code, graphics, systems architecture – all of these arise from
somewhere, from human agents. In this regard, the role designers and programmers play in shaping these spaces is fundamental. (Taylor 2003b: 25)

These processes are interlinked with a (potential) community of gamers (Rubenstein 2007) and so sex and sexual representation are no coincidences in games like World of Warcraft. Rubenstein published a very interesting article on the graphical construction of gender in World of Warcraft; she describes how sexual characteristics of the characters were radicalized during the ‘alpha tests’ (‘alpha tests’ are the first tests before the release of a game, where a selection of players may try the game on special servers, helping the programmers and designers to adjust and balance the game mechanics and content – the virtual world is tested under quasi-normal conditions):

The dimorphism was not always so strong, however. In the Alpha version of the game, races such as the Tauren and the trolls [sic] had more similarity between genders than difference: facial structure, body shape, posture, and even choice of accessories were more similar than not…. Apparently there were many complaints about the women of both races being ‘ugly’ and so the developers changed them into their current incarnations… (Rubenstein 2007)

As with the alpha tests, developers seem to leave little to chance. The so-called ‘beta tests’ are also a part of the constant procedure of releasing new content through expanding the game.

Traditionally – and World of Warcraft is no exception – lots of role-playing worlds are related to the construction of the fantasy world presented in The Lord of the Rings by J. R. R. Tolkien (see also Bates 2006: 10). A creature race that has been adopted in many games and literal fantasy tales is that of elves. Elves are, within this tradition of storytelling, slender, thin, smoothly moving; they are creatures of androgynous elegance.

A noticeable dispute started in the gamer community in 2006, when Blizzard Entertainment introduced the ‘blood elves’. Initially, the blood elves had been conceptualized according to the Tolkien-esque fantasy tradition. They had been designed as rather androgynous figures – especially in comparison with other races in World of Warcraft, such as the testosterone-oozing orcs. Because of the resonance in the beta tests, the designers decided to shape the male blood elves in an explicitly more muscular manner (GameStar.de 2006a): this led to active and agitated discussion in parts of the gamer community. In public forums and guild forums, players fervently discussed whether elves should look graceful-androgynous or muscular-manly.

An analysis of the controversial disputes surrounding this ‘blood elf incident’ reveals two main streams of player expectations. First, stereotypically exaggerated characters seem to appeal better to male players, but not exclusively. Non-‘male’ features were degraded with attributes such as ‘gay’ and ‘metrosexual’. This is not news and is an issue in gender studies already – for example in the work of Huntemann or Graner Ray (Huntemann 2004, 2005; Graner Ray 2004).

World of Maskcraft vs. World of Queercraft?

2. For more specific information on the discourse and tensions between designers and gamers see Taylor (2003b).

3. To comprehend this discussion in the German gaming community, I recommend the discussion forum of the gaming magazine GameStar (GameStar.de 2006b). In English language, the discussion can be followed on the important World of Warcraft databases, such as Allakhazam. com. I also recommend blogs of gamers, addressing homophobia in World of Warcraft, such as Brian Crecente (2006). See also Rubenstein 2007.

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4. It is important to mention though that players should not be lumped together blindly. The game environment reproduces the hetero-normativity of the 'outside' world and carries it to extremes. But this does not keep gay, lesbian, transgender and queer gamers from playing.

5. A more thorough analysis of gamers' horizons of expectations seems to be crucial when discussing visual sex/gender representation in computer games. It is not only important to see the results of a process – it is important to look at the negotiation within this process. Since this is not the main aim of this paper, I restrict myself to these outlining remarks – though I hope that my comments point towards a more discourse-based approach when analysing visual representations of sex in games.

6. The only non-synchronous form of communication in the game itself is the mail system. Mailboxes are located in many towns in the game environment. Players can use these mailboxes to send messages, goods or money to other players.


But, secondly, and this is easily overlooked, the fantasy tradition seems to provide a strong counterweight against this tendency towards exaggeration. World of Warcraft is not a sequel to Tolkien's books. But it is still a sequel to a certain tradition, a narrated reality, that evokes specific expectations in many gamers. Located within this tradition, certain characters have to have a certain appearance and certain characteristics: such as the elves, who should, according to many players, look graceful and androgy nous. Such expectations can be transverse to the expectations players have in life 'outside' the game. Conversely, that some players accept androgyny in the game does not mean that they necessarily accept androgyny 'outside' the game. Many gamers defend the blood elves' androgyny by referring to a certain fantasy tradition. But these gamers also – like the players who degrade androgynous characters – refer to the expectation of stereotyped, normalized appearance of a creature or a creature race. Hence, androgyny seems to be accepted because it has a tradition in the fantasy narrative – and not because androgyny or hermaphroditism are considered acceptable outside this tradition.4

Analysing visual representations of sex in World of Warcraft shows a strong dimorphism – a dimorphism that is partly a product of communication between gamers and designers. But a look at the different reactions of gamers when scrutinizing sex in World of Warcraft shows a variety of opinions on these representations. The visual appearance can be measured from many horizons of expectation, and these expectations can also collide with expectations of other players as well as with expectations from the 'outside' world.5

4. World of TalkCraft: interaction between players
In this section, I introduce three more channels of communication usually used by gamers when playing World of Warcraft: written chat, guild home pages/forums and voice chat communication.

Written chat
Amongst communication via social action (e.g. attacking, fleeing, being passive), the game surface offers a text-based channel of communication: written chat. The chat window is part of the game interface's standard appearance; it can be modified by switching private and public channels on and off. Thus, each player can decide out of which channels he or she wants to receive instant chat messages.6 The game-rhythm in World of Warcraft forces the players to take a break after every battle phase. The phases of battle take between a few seconds and several minutes – after fighting for a while, the characters have to recover their life points and spell points. Especially during this downtime, chats are used to communicate.7

The different chat channels are related to certain functions, for example the trade of goods and items, the search for group members or (mainly on PvP servers) the organization of the defence against hostile groups of players. It is common that chat channels are 'misused' – this is called 'flaming' or 'spamming': the unsolicited sharing of personal opinion, the results of sports games, touting, taunting and private conversations in inadequate channels.
Voice chat communication

World of Warcraft is mainly based on cooperative play with other players. Most secluded regions of the game (‘instances’) are designed for groups of five players; there are also instances for up to 40 players. Ever since the expansion, The Burning Crusade (first launched in January 2007), only instances for up to 25 players have been released. The game characters – especially in bigger groups – do specialist tasks. Healers and damage dealers tend to be extremely vulnerable; at the same time the tanks are lost without getting healed or if the enemies are not killed fast enough by the damage dealers. Especially the so-called ‘aggro management’ – the concentration of hostile attacks on less vulnerable troops – demands quick reactions and seamless cooperation between players. Written communication is therefore unpractical, and real-time communication becomes essential for success.

A very common platform for this purpose is Teamspeak, a voice-over IP chat program that allows players to talk to each other while playing. The software is free and independent of the game developer Blizzard Entertainment. Bigger guilds mostly provide their own Teamspeak servers, which can be set up and used for free. The gamers speak into microphones and can talk to each other while playing; the Teamspeak software runs in the background. Teamspeak works like a chat room: by joining a (mostly password-protected) server, the players can use several chat rooms (these are also called ‘channels’) in which they can talk with one or several players. Usually a server consists of a multitude of chat rooms. The channels are commonly separated by their communicative purpose: there are channels for ‘private’ conversations, channels for meetings of guild leaders and character-class representatives, channels for raids, for dungeon battles, for PvP and so on. In most guilds, joining and regular use of Teamspeak or other voice chat programs are mandatory. Because real-time coordination can make the difference between victory and defeat, many players decline grouping up with players who do not use a voice chat program.

Guild forums and homepages

In guilds, a considerable amount of organization is located outside the game environment provided by the game software (see also Ducheneaut et al. 2007: 847). A guild can be compared to a sports club. The players indeed meet primarily on the field, where they also talk about the game, about organizational issues and the strategy for the next match. But the results of the last meeting are posted in the club house. Here, the players sign up for tournaments and events; the complex systems of person rotation in raids and the distribution of loot are organized on the guild homepages and forums.

Guild homepages form the communicative backbone of these gaming associations. Discussions on raid morale, new strategies, changes in the game software, the latest battle videos8 and the newest jokes – all this takes place independent of the actual game, on self-organized and self-programmed websites. Here significant discussion is held and recorded. One reason for this solution is the impermanence of the in-game options for communication. The in-game chat cannot be saved and searched, with the oral communication via Teamspeak being even more elusive. The websites help the guild members to gather, organize and save information: who learned which profession in the game? Who can craft which items?

World of Maskcraft vs. World of Queercraft?

8. Many gamers record how they master tough or suspenseful battles and post these videos on platforms like YouTube or Warcraftmovies.com. Apart from this, a movie-making subculture has arisen amongst gamers. An outstanding example of movie directing by playing World of Warcraft is the movie Illegal Danish – Super Snacks, produced by the Dementia-Myndflame-Machinima-Team around Clint and D. W. Hackleman. The movie is available on www.warcraftmovies.com (accessed 15 July 2008). For an introductory article on movie culture in World of Warcraft, see Lowood 2006.
Who gave his or her character which class skills? How can the boss XY be defeated? How much money is in the guild bank and who did not pay the weekly due? Private details are also exchanged: where the players live, their age, their AIM, Skype, or e-mail addresses and so on. In this way, the homepages tighten the community network more than it would have been possible through the game software alone.

After my observations in the previous section, one might have thought that the category of gender could be determined by the game graphics: all game characters are cast into a graphic pattern of exaggerated masculinity and femininity and the screen teems with gently hip-swivelling, full-bosomed graces on one side and brawny muscle men on the other. In this section, it has become clear though that the graphic surface is not the only important layer of game experience and game reality: it is not even the main layer of communication for the organized gamer community. To illustrate this, I will develop a model of communication in World of Warcraft in the following section.

5. World of CommuniCraft: the four layers of communication in World of Warcraft

As laid out above, the gamer can be simultaneously located on multiple layers of communication: he/she steers a visually represented game character while writing to group members or friends who play on a different location – or are not even logged into the game. Additionally, the player can chat with other gamers on the game surface or communicate through posts on the guild homepage. Four basic layers of communication can therefore be identified: visual communication, written chat communication, written communication on guild webpages/forums and voice chat communication. The visual communication is based on the game’s software itself. On this foundation the gamers see the characters of other players and non-verbally interact with them (for non-verbal social norms in online worlds see Yee et al. 2007). Still, the design of the game environment lies in the hands of the developers. The written chat is also part of the game software and is used for rudimentary communication – but not in battle situations, which form the centre of game activity in World of Warcraft. The forums and guild homepages – on the level of ‘written communication’ – are provided by the gamers themselves and serve the purpose of self-organization. But it is hard to visit a forum while playing – so the use is not simultaneous with playing the game (although the forum can be opened in a window running in the background, with players switching from the game to the forum). The voice chat is run by external programs and is also organized by the players themselves.

Thus, the last two layers of communication are directly organized by the gamers, the first and second layers mainly by the game software. Layer by layer, the players evade the restrictions of the game more and more, especially from the default graphics of the game environment. The written chat is still provided by the software, but it can be switched off and modified. The content in the written chat is set by the players even though the game design intends the functional differentiation among the channels. At the same time the ‘chatiquette’ (the norms of behaviour) is controlled and enforced both by representatives of the game’s developers and by players. On the other hand, the forums and guild homepages are
private websites, with no control or censorship by Blizzard and usually no financial connection to the enterprise. But still, this layer is based on visual signs. The gamers evade the power of the ‘masters of the game environment’, but they do not evade the restrictions of non-simultaneous written and quasi-non-simultaneous written communication, such as the time differences between expressions and the prediction on icons. However, the synchronic voice chat is freed from these constraints.

At the same time, by stepping through the layers, the players’ anonymity decreases. The graphic game surface offers the highest level of anonymity: the players steer their characters without sounds – or signs. Even a computer could do that. By using the written chat, players potentially reveal information on what their first language is (or is not). For gaining access to forums and guild homepages, a more solid form of identity is necessary: the forums and homepages are usually only fully accessible to approved guild members. Players have to sign up and enter an e-mail address; furthermore, guilds often accept only players who are known by other guild members. In many cases the players have to hand in an application: based on the application the guild leaders decide whether or not to accept the new player (see also Taylor 2007: 7).

The voice chat, finally, provides the lowest level of anonymity. The players’ voices can be identified, providing information on age, sex, social background, provenance and – especially in German – the dialectal region they come from. But, even more, the players open a window into their lives. Their microphones not only record their own voices, but also the parent calling them to dinner, the three-year-old son on the player’s lap or the drunk housemates barging into the room after midnight.

6. World of MaskCraft or World of QueerCraft?
In everyday life, sex and gender are typically identified through visual and acoustic signals: appearance and voice. In the statistic ‘normal case’, these signals are compatible. But as soon as someone looks ‘like a woman’ but has a voice ‘like a man’, many people are disturbed. In World of Warcraft,

9. This does not mean that these websites are power-free spaces: there is indeed censorship by the owners of the websites and the guild/forum members.

10. This happens from time to time: players program (and sometimes sell) so-called ‘bots’ that move independently through the game environment. However, this is prohibited by the game rules.

11. Or, as Bartle (2003) points out: ‘Voice is reality’. Yee (2007) even suggests that the use of voice chat might change the immersion into a game. This might be true for RPG servers, but it is debateable for non-RPG servers, which are specially designed for players with lower expectations regarding role playing.
the visual and acoustic layers of communication also frame the perception of sex and gender. The visual stimulus shows a player whether other game characters are female or male. The acoustic stimulus reveals whether the other player is female or male. Thus, these two forms of communication are crucial for the construction and attribution of sex and gender. Of course, sex and gender can be communicated on every layer of communication described above. In German, sex and gender can be conveyed grammatically by word endings signifying, for example, cases (e.g. nominative, accusative) and by personal pronouns. Obviously, sex and gender are also conducted phonetically in voice chat communication, as in every form of language-based communication. But since the impact of the voice is absent in the case of written language, grammatical tokens for sex and gender become far more influential than in spoken language.

In World of Warcraft, not everybody looks ‘like a woman’ while talking ‘like a woman’. Visual and aural interpretations of sex and gender often do not coincide. As a result, the allocations of gender and sex can be spun around in written communication. The following example is part of a discussion on a closed German guild forum.

Hello!

First of all, I agree with all the prior statements relating to [female name of a female avatar A (female player)] and [neutral name of a female avatar B (male player)]! They are good friends whatever people may say about them. Yet there are situations in life when one has to leave the game behind in order to evolve and find oneself!

As for you [neutral name of a female avatar C (male player)] You are a really good [female] guild leader! I don’t think there could be a better [male/female] one than you at this point. I would also like to thank you for leading us so well this far and hope that everything will continue so well.

This text is a reaction to the departure of two core team players, who quit the game completely. Thereupon, the guild suffered personnel shortages in raids, and the raids were less successful with two important players missing. Consequently, many players in the guild were dissatisfied with the new situation. The guild leader (male, who played a female character) advocated searching for new guild members, thereby re-establishing peace within the guild. In this post, the author of the text thanks him for his reaction.

Here, a commingling of the game character – the avatar – and the gamer becomes grammatically obvious: the author mentions the comrade players, who to him are ‘good friends’. But he addresses them with the names of their avatars. One could assume that the names of the avatars become players’ nicknames. But more than that happens. Not only are the names of the avatars used in the post, but so are their sexes. References to sex, as well as the border between gamer and game, start to blur. As shown above, the organizing of the guild is not part of the game software itself – nonetheless the visually determined in-game sex is represented (because of the grammar) in the post: ‘You are a really good
[female] guild leader!' The male, who is the guild leader, is first addressed
as a female. But in the next proposition it becomes obvious that the author
addresses the guild leader as a hybrid of gamer and avatar, a hybrid of
male and female components: 'I don’t think there could be a better
[male/female] one than you at this point.’ And yet, it is not the game char-
acter who leads the guild – it is the person behind this avatar. The game
character primarily exists in the game environment, manifested graphi-
cally. German grammar, in this case, seems to open a possibility of flexibly
handling gender allocations in a way that might look contradictory at first
glance. But a second look shows that an amalgamation, not a contradic-
tion, is the result of the described use of language.

This amalgamation makes the use of the term ‘player-avatar-hybrid’
apt in this context. As a player, I often noted amalgamations like these
myself. For instance, I might see a female avatar, but whenever I speak to
the player behind the avatar, I hear the answer in a male voice. Similarly, I
might address the male player with the female avatar’s name and that
player answers as a ‘real’ person, not as a game character. For example, I
might ask the male player of the avatar ‘Emelie’ how ‘her’ girlfriend is.
This also works the other way around. If I ask this player to heal my game
character (or even ‘me’), addressing him with his ‘real’ male name, this
results in an action by the female avatar.

This amalgamation itself stands behind an ever bigger context: the
amalgamation of virtual and non-virtual worlds. As Taylor (2007: 9–17)
shows, something is added to the online worlds in World of Warcraft: quan-
tification and effectiveness. As a mage, for example, I don’t convince my
guild members by playing my role persuasively – I convince by the damage
per second I can deal in a raid or by the equipment I wear (see also Taylor
2007: 14). Quantified game performance forcefully pushes into the quali-
tative, language-based fantasy world. Also the ‘blood elf incident’ suggests
that two horizons of expectations (hetero-normativity from outside the
game context vs. fantasy tradition from within the game context) are
openly clashing and being negotiated in World of Warcraft.

As I have shown above, the different layers of communication offer
different degrees of anonymity – with voice chat resulting in the lowest
levels of anonymity. Richard Bartle (2003) analyses sharply: ‘Adding reality [by adding voice chat (cs)] to a virtual world robs it of what makes it
compelling – it takes away that which is different between virtual worlds
and the real world: the fact that they are not the real world’ (emphasis
in original). The gap between ‘offline’ and ‘online’ reality becomes narrower,
because the different communication modes make them blur. Consequently,
especially on non-RPG servers, the distinction between ‘virtual’ and ‘non-
virtual’ begins to melt.14 This suggests, as a further consequence, that
players are not only constructing their ‘identities on the other side of
the looking glass’ (Turkle 1995: 177). They are simultaneously (re-)
constructing their identity in the ‘real’ world.

In such a setting, the relation between avatar and player – and between
the sexes – is not as simple as it might seem at first glance, and it goes
beyond the idea of simply ‘swapping’ or ‘bending’ gender while playing. A
male player does not just change his sex or gender by playing a female
game character; there might even be a constant change, a simultaneity

14. As the text analysed
above shows: not only
grammatically, but
also through its
content. It is not
made clear in the post
if the player leads the
guild, or the avatar, or
both.
between the ‘virtual’ and the ‘non-virtual’: constant gender flexing. This amplifies the tendency of the category bundle sex/gender to logically dissolve: it is possible to communicate, using different and variable (temporary) grammatical markers for sex/gender at the same time. As a result, it no longer matters which grammatical markers one uses, because the same goal (e.g. to prompt an action by a game character) can be achieved with each act of communication. While playing, the category bundle sex/gender is no longer of communicative concern, because its markers can be exchanged equivalently.

Being male and female at the same time does not imply (at least not in the situation of playing) sexual preferences, nor does it suggest either trans-sexuality or androgyny. It does not provoke questioning or the problematization of sex and gender. It is simply unproblematic that someone has a female name and appearance, but speaks with a male voice. It is also unproblematic to give a female avatar a male or neutral name (cf. MacCallum-Stewart 2008: 35).

Attribution of sex/gender, as I have shown above, is exchangeable in World of Warcraft – at least on certain layers of communication. The question now is: what is the relation of this rather open acceptance of fuzzy or non-existent genders to the everyday construction of sex and gender in the ‘real’ world? Does the ‘virtual’ world affect the ‘real’ world? If the border between avatar and player can become indistinct, is there a possibility that the ‘definite’ sex/gender of a gamer in the ‘normal’ world can also start to blur? Or is the permanent switching of sex/gender markers only a masquerade? Put bluntly: does a communicational space for masquerade – a ‘World of MaskCraft’ – open up while playing? Or does a space open up in which fixed attributions – formerly provided by the categories gender and sex – become obsolete: a ‘World of QueerCraft’?

It is plausible that some players can toy with markers for sex and gender more unreservedly (especially on the two middle layers of communication); the more unambiguously mask-like representations of the sexes are secured on the outer layers of communication. The exaggerated dimorphism on the visual layer of communication, and – even more – the unambiguous assignment to a certain sex through the voice recognition in voice chats could be used by players to constantly reassure themselves and others about their ‘true’ sex/gender. This could explain some of the homophobic reactions during the ‘blood elf incident’: the more androgynous blood elves had the potential to destabilize the visual unambiguity. It could be possible that the practice of (visual and acoustic) reassuring sex/gender identity is the very basis for being able to engage with unreserved attributions of sex/gender. Taking female or undefined roles could be compared with a temporary masquerade, comparable, for example, with male ballet performances in German regional carnival events: the ‘guys’ from the soccer team can wear make-up and tutus because they demonstrate their masculinity through their ‘masculine’ hobby and the appearance as a male sports group.

Do markers for sex/gender (like voice and appearance) have to be definite and secured on some layers of communication to initially allow players to toy with them on other layers of communication? Can players only
toy with attributions of sex and gender because they know what they know about sex/gender – and not because they forget what they knew?

The web consisting of communication, game and players is not woven that simply. It became apparent earlier that the visualization of the sexes is very bipolar; I have addressed the fact that players judge this exaggeration with different concepts of normality. They can hold similar views on the appearance of the characters – although arriving at these views through different reasons and expectations as well as with different arguments. Alongside expectations of variance with the mainstream fantasy tradition, an acceptance seems to develop – and, as seen in the example of the ‘blood elf incident’, a certain expectation of androgyny and variable sexes beyond strict bipolarity can emerge. As I have mentioned above, this openness does not automatically have to come with an openness towards variations of sex in the ‘real’ world. But this, in my opinion, is not the point at issue. The bottom line is that within the game a space emerges, in which sex and gender can be variable. Players can explore this space and participate in forming it; this can be experienced in Teamspeak chats, on guild forums and on websites. As I have mentioned before, my analysis is based on the communication in non-RPG worlds, so these explorations mainly affect communication between players – and not social actions like in-game relationships, that are built up more frequently on RPG servers. However, it would be most interesting to examine whether the shown use of language changes virtual gender on RPG servers.15

The genesis of this space is tightly connected to the features of the different layers of communication – and the fact of their simultaneous coexistence. Gamers use different channels of communication that offer them different degrees of communicative freedom and anonymity. By doing so, they open up different possibilities of communicating sex/gender and of portraying themselves as player-avatar hybrids. Consequently, players are confronted with a great deal of inconsistency and variability. Being undefined, therefore, is, as well as the hyper-definition of the game characters, part of the everyday game experience – and becomes normal. In this context, in particular, the following questions should be answered in further research, based on focused observance and recordings of gamers’ conversations: is masculine demeanour constructed in certain contexts of communication? How is this done? Is masculine (or feminine) demeanour constructed differently when toying with flexible concepts of sex/gender? How and when exactly can markers for sex/gender become obsolete? Which communicative and technical framework requirements have to exist? When and why can this fail?

It is important to mention that not all players use gender-indifferent speech, and also that it cannot be found in all game situations. But this is exactly what makes the communication interesting: (grammatical) markers for sex/gender in communication in World of Warcraft are in most cases not mixed up or flexible. But if they happen to be fuzzy, no problems arise in the communication between the players.

This is precisely the reason why the dissolving of gender is no masquerade. When wearing the mask of a different sex – for example in certain forms of transvestitism – certain concepts of sex are ruptured in order to make them visible, to challenge them, to discuss them. In World of

15. In addition to that it would be worth scrutinizing if and how interaction with non-player characters (NPCs) changes. This facet is left out because my article concentrates on communication between players.
Warcraft, however, the diversity of concepts of sex/gender can be integrated without disruption. The virtual ‘gender troubling’ goes without saying, it happens invisibly and without being questioned. Therefore, the ‘queerness’ in the playing of World of Warcraft is not a conscious, intellectually and theoretically supported process – like the deconstruction of sex/gender in the academic queer school of thought. It is more of a side effect of the game, which evolves from the co-existence of the different layers of communication. The category bundle sex/gender is dissolved by the friction generated by the constantly moving borders between player and avatar – and between acoustically, visually and grammatically derived information on sex/gender.

Because the dissolution of gender categories is a side effect of the game, no space free from connotations for queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender gamers is automatically created. Still, queer, gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender players can be confronted with prejudices, hatred and taunts when playing. But still a space opens, in which otherwise discriminated against constructions of self are less questioned. The variable spaces for playing and communicating in online games like World of Warcraft can, therefore, habituate the hetero-normative parts of society to diversity and variation. Online worlds might, in the long run, even provide support in reducing prejudices and in living in and with variable concepts of sex/gender in the offline world.

Works cited


World of Maskcraft vs. World of Queercraft?


the sexes, then the inequality has to be restored by exaggerating their appearance. In this case it would be interesting to compare the graphics in games in which the sex also influences the abilities of the characters, games that do not provide functional equality like World of Warcraft. (On feminism and World of Warcraft see also Corneliusen 2008).


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Contributor details
Before starting to write his Magister thesis, Christian Schmieder spent many nights exploring Azeroth – the universe of World of Warcraft. Currently, he is a graduate student (Sociology and Linguistics) at Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg (Germany). He worked as a native speaker/teaching assistant in the German Department at Colgate University, NY (2006–7) and is at present a teaching/research assistant at Freiburg University’s Department of Sociology.

Contact: Am Kirchacker 18; 79115 Freiburg.
E-mail: ChristianSchmieder@gmx.de