

Playing with Gender: The Gender Swapping Experience of Massively Multiplayer  
Online Role-Playing Game Players

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Presented to the faculty of  
The California School of Professional Psychology  
San Francisco Campus  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements of the Degree  
Doctor of Psychology

By

Tin (Peter) Chan

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This dissertation by Tin (Peter) Chan, has been approved  
by the committee members signed below who  
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California School of Professional Psychology – San Francisco Campus  
in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

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PREVIEW

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**Abstract**

Playing with Gender: The Gender Swapping Experience of Massively Multiplayer  
Online Role-Playing Game Players

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This study explored the gaming and gender swapping experiences of massively multiplayer online role-playing game (MMORPG) players in relation to the players' sex and sex-roles. Twelve Final Fantasy XI (FFXI) players (6 males and 6 females) between the ages of 23 and 55 (median = 26) were interviewed and completed the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). The study focused on reasons and motivations for gender swapping, gender swapping experiences, and disclosure of gender swapping.

Eight motivations for gender swapping emerged from the interviews: aesthetic reasons, interest in the reactions of others, prior gaming history with male protagonists, avoidance of gender biases, attaining social status, strategy in game advancement, personality match, and the influence of gender stereotypes. Nine themes described the gender swapping experiences of these players: gaining insights, non-issue, unexpected social interactions, acquiring gendered behaviors, strategic advantages, avoidance of biases and stereotypes, increase in social status, prevention of unsolicited male approaches, and personality similarities. Three types of disclosure reactions were identified: nonchalant and without negative

interactions, shocked/surprised without negative interactions, and mixed reactions with some negative interactions.

Men and women differed in their views of the gender swapping experience as a whole. Overall, male players appeared to be less aware of the social and psychological impact their gender swapping, while female players appeared more conscious and deliberate. Only minor sex-role differences were noted in the gender swapping experience for men. However, women with a traditional feminine sex-role appeared to interpret their gaming experience with more conventional gender roles while women with non-traditional gender roles focused their gaming experience on avoiding negative gender biases and stereotypes and attaining higher social status. It is suggested that women are more likely than men to utilize gender swapping in MMORPGs as a way of identity exploration. However, these identity explorations may differ according to the sex-roles of these women – women with non-traditional sex-roles are more likely than those with a traditional feminine sex-role to challenge the rigid gender roles and stereotypes in our society through their gender swapping in MMORPGs.

**Dedication**

I dedicate this doctoral dissertation to my mother, who has always believed in me and provided me with unconditional love and support in my life.

PREVIEW

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This dissertation is the last piece of the puzzle in my overly extended years of graduate studies. It has consumed much of my time and a tremendous amount of my emotional energy. However, the process has been rewarding and the end result, satisfying.

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## GENDER SWAPPING IN MMORPGs

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PREVIEW

## Introduction

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) have gained increasing popularity in the last decade (Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2003; Kelly, 2004). Unlike traditional forms of video and computer games, they allow players to have an immersive experience in an expansive virtual world where they can create their own characters and identities while engaging in gameplay, and socially interact with other players (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008; Kelly, 2004). The ability to design and create a character or avatar in the game allows players to explore a wide range of identities they would otherwise be unable to explore in the real world, on such dimensions as gender, race, and other physical characteristics (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Suler, 2002; Yee, 2006b).

Most research conducted on MMORPGs have focused primarily on the addictive quality or negative aspects of gameplay (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Chappell, Eatough, Davies, & Griffiths, 2006; Ng & Wiemer-Hastings, 2005; Whang, Lee, & Chang, 2003) while only a small number of studies explored other, more positive aspects of online gaming (Griffiths, 2003), such as online socializing (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008; Krotoski, 2004) and computer-mediated social support (Whang et al., 2003). A small number of studies examined the phenomenon of gender swapping within the virtual worlds of MMORPGs (Cole & Griffiths, 2007; Griffiths, Davies, & Chappell, 2004a; Griffiths, Davies & Chappell, 2004b; Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). However, none have examined the experience of MMORPG players who gender-swap in the context of their own sex roles and gender identities.

According to Hussain & Griffiths (2008), the phenomenon of gender swapping refers to a gamer “playing a different gendered character from oneself” (p. 48). Cole and Griffiths (2007) suggested that “virtual gaming may allow players to express themselves in ways they may not feel comfortable doing in real life because of their appearance, gender, sexuality, and/or age” (p. 575). Yee, Bailenson, Urbanek, Chang, and Merget (2007) point out that MMORPG worlds resemble the real world in many ways, including social behavior and norms. Furthermore, Park and Henley (2007) found in their study that characters chosen by the players are representative of the players’ own personalities. These findings suggest that the gender-swapping experience of players may have implications that extend beyond gameplaying in the virtual worlds.

To date, gender swapping in MMORPGs is an under-researched area (Hussain & Griffiths, 2008). This study will explore the gaming and gender swapping experiences of MMORPG players as they relate to the players’ own sex roles and gender identities. With the increasing number of MMORPGs available today, the array of possible characters and situations is vast. Since the researcher has personal familiarity with the MMORPG *Final Fantasy XI* (FFXI), this study will focus specifically on players of FFXI. By doing so, the study can preserve the homogeneity of the virtual world used and also provide coherence in the data collected. Furthermore, the researcher’s personal knowledge of the game will enhance the communication and mutual understanding with the participants during the interview process.

Participants will be recruited online and then be interviewed by the researcher, and also complete the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI). The data will be used descriptively in order to paint a picture of the gaming and gender-swapping experience of the participants, and participants' gender identity and sex role will be considered in relation to their gaming experience. The researcher hopes to identify areas within the phenomenon of gender swapping that suggest possible hypotheses for future exploration.

PREVIEW

## Literature Review

To create a background for the proposed study, I will first review literature defining and clarifying the concepts of sex, gender, gender identity and sex roles. Next, I will examine the literature on the psychology of play. Finally, a section on MMORPGs and Final Fantasy XI, the game used for this study, will be presented.

### Gender Identities and Sex Roles

**Sex and gender.** The terms sex and gender have become synonymous in the social sciences literature (Gentile, 1993). Moreover, the two terms have been used interchangeably in everyday casual conversations (Diamond, 2002). However, there are notable differences between the two. In fact, according to Diamond (2002), in order to have a psychological understanding of identity, it is important to maintain “clear conceptual distinctions between the two words sex and gender and associated concepts” (p. 321).

In the most basic terms, a person’s sex is defined by their male or female genitalia identified at birth (Diamond, 2002; Howard & Hollander, 1997; Lahey, 1998; Thurer, 2005; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Although people will usually remain in the same category of sex through life, this does not always happen (e.g., transsexual individuals) (Howard & Hollander, 1997; Lev, 2004). While sex describes the distinction between male and female based on biological and physical characteristics, gender, in contrast, “is the psychological experience of one’s sex (Gentile, 1993). Diamond (2000) suggests that “sex would refer to biological traits while gender would refer to social/cultural ones” (p. 47). Diamond (2002) later adds that “gender is related to an imposed or adopted social and psychological

condition” (p. 321). Thurer (2005) states that gender “refers to the social expectations for a person’s sex” (p. 3). In an attempt to clarify the usage of the terms, United States Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia wrote:

The word gender has acquired the new and useful connotation of cultural or attitudinal characteristics (as opposed to physical characteristics) distinctive to the sexes. That is to say, gender is to sex as feminine is to female and masculine is to male. (as cited in Diamond, 2002, p. 321)

Such a definition is limiting, as it suggests rigid gender-typing where males are considered masculine and female feminine. This definition disregards the normal variations in the expression of masculinity and femininity in both males and females. Furthermore, it ignores the natural human sexual variations, such as intersex individuals (Connell, 2009; Lev, 2004). Nonetheless, as many have argued, for this study gender is defined as a socially constructed concept that is not biologically defined (Butler, 2004; Green, 2005) while sex is a term used to differentiate amongst individuals based on biological characteristics (Diamond, 2002; Howard & Hollander, 1997).

**Gender identity and gender roles.** In general, gender identity refers to the subjective experience of being male or female (Lahey, 1998; Myers, 1998; Van der Zanden, 1981); it is a major part of one’s self-concept (Howard & Hollander, 1997). It has also been defined as “an image of oneself as relatively masculine or feminine in characteristics” (Berk, 2004, p. 263). Lev (2004) defines gender identity as the internal experience of gender, how one experiences one’s own sense of self as a gendered being. However, Diamond (2002) argues that “sexual identity speaks to

the way one views him- or herself as a male or female” (p. 323) and that “gender identity is recognition of the perceived social gender attributed to a person” (p. 323). Gender identity is theorized to develop early in infancy as newborns are identified as either male or female based on their genitals and their “gender-appropriate” behaviors are reinforced by their parents (Lahey, 1998). Green (2005) noted that most members of both sexes are able to develop and maintain a clear sense of gender identity and a psychological sense of belongingness to their own sex quite early on in childhood. Once established, gender identity is believed to be quite resistant to change (Howard & Hollander, 1997; West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Howard & Hollander, writing in 1997, assert that “gender identity tends to be dichotomous—people generally think of themselves as male or female, not something in between” (p. 16). However, they explained that gender identity “may or may not be congruent with someone’s sex or gender, and it is unrelated to sexual orientation” (Howard & Hollander, 1997, p. 16). Much like gender itself, gender identities are socially constructed (Lev, 2004) and laden with cultural expectations (Lahey, 1998).

Gender roles (a term that is often used interchangeably with the term sex roles (Lev, 2004)) are the behaviors and characteristics that a culture expects of males or females based on their biological sex (Diamond, 2002; Geary, 2010; Howard & Hollander, 1997; Kovach, 1990; Myers, 1998; Stockard & Johnson, 1980; Rice, 2001; Vander Zanden, 1981). These roles are the “outward expressions of masculinity or femininity in social settings” (Rice, 2001, p. 267). The term sex role was originally used by Margaret Mead to describe culturally determined behaviors