Virtual Inequality: A woman's place in cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

EVE Online is a space-themed Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG) that to date has remained largely unexplored in an academic context. This particular MMOG has a reputation among players as being both extremely difficult to learn how to play, as well as being unattractive to female players. In this paper I describe my proposed dissertation research that will trace the relationships between the human and non-human actors that have resulted in the *EVE Online* player community's demographic makeup being so different than other, more gender-balanced, MMOGs.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8 [**Computing** Milieux]: Personal Computing – Games; J.4 [**Computer Applications**]: Social and behavioral sciences – Sociology.

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

EVE Online, gender, STEM, Actor-Network Theory, MMOGs, online community

1. BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The idea that games are the domain of men is hardly new – in the opening of H.G. Wells' *Little Wars* [32], an instruction manual for a table top war game, he explains the game is meant be played by males of all ages and "by girls of the better sort, and by a few rare and gifted women". In fact, the full title of the book is *Little Wars: A game for boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girl who likes boys' games and books*. While it may be tempting to view Wells' writing as an example of an antiquated view of gender roles, the idea that games (especially video games) are by default masculine pursuits has often been repeated [21][33]. The research proposed here will examine the ways in which game spaces, in particular the shared online game environments of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs), become coded as masculine, and the ways in which female participation is consistently reinforced as being deviant, or taken up "by a few rare and gifted women".

As Jenson and de Castell [15] demonstrate in their review of the literature to date, an area that remains particularly fraught with

gendered assumptions is academic video game research where, for example, gaming expertise (and general technological aptitude) is often conflated with masculinity (most recently Wang et al. [31]). That male play is the "norm" against which females are measured has been continually reinforced both by the games industry generally and by research that reinforces those presumptions. Two competing narratives account for those women who do play: one assumes she is an outlier, the other assumes she needs to be specifically targeted with casual "female-friendly games" that fall outside the "normal" video game genres [7][13]. Interventionist researchers have taken the approach of encouraging girls and women to participate in learning to create games and participate in female-only video game clubs [17], however, outside of these much needed interventions, the majority of video game players *and* creators continue to be men. This makes other claims that frequently cite MMOGs as a venue for socialization and community building [9][26][28] problematic, as many of these studies assume that membership is a choice and *all* potential participants have equal opportunity to join. Additionally, many educators are arguing that non-educational online games are a valuable site of learning [10][11][24][25][27], yet issues of access (including economic access) remain largely unaddressed. This study will ask, who has the opportunity to learn in these online spaces, and who is barred entry? If learning can happen within a MMOG, and males are the default users of these online spaces, in what ways are female gamers literally being left behind?

2. PROPOSED PROJECT

To address these questions, I focus my research on an online gaming community that is understood as to be almost completely populated by males, the MMOG *EVE Online* -- a spaceship-themed game environment in which players use ships to navigate, trade, and generally "play" with one another. *EVE* stands apart from other games of its kind as less than 5% of their 350,000+ players are female. This is in contrast to other popular games such as *World of Warcraft*, which estimates that at least 20% of their 12 million players are women. Discussions about *EVE* and the game's players often dismiss the lack of female participation as being simply a lack of interest, arguing that *EVE* has an "extremely difficult learning curve," a quality that is purportedly unattractive to female players [5][20]. In particular, the calculations and math-heavy requirements of *EVE's* gameplay (which has resulted in the larger gaming community to refer to *EVE Online* as "Excel Online") is viewed as a turnoff for female players, mirroring the idea that women avoid the STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) subjects as they are "too masculine" [23]. However, feminist scholars have demonstrated that it is simply not by choice that many women do not gravitate towards these subjects. Instead, women's access is impeded, and this barrier works to reinforce stereotypical gender roles that assume that women are "naturally" less interested in particular forms of technology [14][16][30]. In order to move beyond the gender disparity documented within the STEM fields, it is of the utmost importance to understand the gendered assumptions

surrounding technologies, especially those that are wholly voluntary like games.

My research will critically examine *EVE* both as a potential site for "learning" and as a site where very few women elect to play. Using the following questions to frame my investigations, I ask:

1. Given *EVE*'s reputation as a math-heavy game, has it attracted players who are educated in STEM subjects?

2. Why do some players (often males) invest large amount of time in *EVE* while others (often females) spend minimal time (or stop playing entirely)?

3. What do current *EVE* players view as necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in the game? Is this knowledge accessible to all players, or are there players that act as 'gatekeepers,' sharing knowledge with particular players over others?

4. How do women talk about their reasons for playing, not playing, or quitting *EVE?* To what extent is there an overlap between talk about *EVE* and talk about participation in STEM subjects?

3. PROPOSED METHODOLOGY

I approach these questions through two stages of data collection. First, I will explore how new players are 'hailed' [1] into the already existing *EVE* community, conducting content analysis of community produced texts (such as game guides, wikis, forum posts, or fan-created videos), as a means of identifying potential gatekeepers for game-related knowledge. Additionally, I will spend at least one month playing *EVE*, observing what sort of interactions happen in the training areas of the game. Second, I will interview current *EVE* players about their own experiences of being a new *EVE* player, and why they have continued to play, comparing the experiences of male and female players to see if they have been acculturated differently. I will also interview players about their education and work experiences, to determine if the *EVE* player-base has a large population of STEM-trained individuals. I will also ask for referrals to their friends who have played *EVE* in the past, but no longer do so, to help understand what compels some players to continue playing, and others to quit. I intend to recruit participants by traveling to Fanfest, the annual *EVE* convention, which draws thousands of *EVE* players to Reykjavik, Iceland every spring. Fanfest also includes "Sisters of *EVE*", an event targeted towards female significant others who do *not* play *EVE*, which presents an ideal opportunity to speak with women who are familiar with the game, and interview them about why they do not play it. Ideally, I will have 10-15 interviews from each of these three groups.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theoretically, this work is guided by Actor Network Theory [18][19], a framework in which I can give equal weight to both human and non-human actors working to shape *EVE* as a larger assemblage in which players meet, socialize, and play within a technologically mediated environment. By "following the actors", I will allow my participants to identify what *they* feel are the important aspects of the EVE community to focus my analysis, and how they have come to feel welcomed (or excluded) by this particular online community. Other game scholars have deployed this theoretical framework successfully as a means of bridging understandings of individual player subjectivity and constraints imposed by the technical characteristics of the game itself [6][8][12][29]. My analysis will focus on identifying the key actors in the *EVE* universe, mapping out the forces that have made this particular community's demographic makeup so different than other, more gender-balanced, MMOGs.

5. KNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTION

EVE represents an academic blindspot with few major studies of the game to date[1] – at best *EVE* is mentioned in a footnote in a study of other MMOGs. Moreover, research continues to remain overwhelmingly focused on the current market dominator, *World of Warcraft*. Instead, this research will highlight the ways in which supposedly benign activities such as playing an internet-based game work to continually reinforce claims surrounding women's "inherent" disinterest in everything but casual and/or domestic forms of technology. By understanding what impedes women's access to and/or interest in the popular MMOG *EVE*, this research will contribute to a larger body of work seeking to increase the number of women represented in STEM-related fields.

This proposed research fits into the larger trajectory of my work that seeks to critically understand how communities form online, and how online participation fits into participants' offline lives. My Honours thesis established that using avatars can be successfully (and reliably) used to interview players within a MMOG, and my Master's thesis demonstrated the ways in which MMOG participation has an overall positive impact on romantic couples' relationships and larger social life [2]. My current research falls into two areas of interest. The first focuses on "border patrolling", that is, who is allowed to participate in online communities and who is barred entry (see for example, the use of the label "troll" to shut down debate on the popular website Reddit.com [4]). The second is an ongoing critical analysis of the ways in which gender stereotypes are replicated online (see for example, the naming conventions and jobs assigned to male and female NPCs within *World of Warcraft* [3]). This dissertation research will bring these two areas of research interest together through research on understudied (yet) popular MMOG.

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