

ELIZABETH COVERDALE

## Cyberculture and Gender Identification in Online Chat Communities

Sometimes I believe that this less material life is our truer life, and that our vain presence on the terraqueous globe is itself the secondary or merely virtual phenomenon.

H.P. Lovecraft, “Beyond The Wall of Sleep”

**I**n a computer generated, 3D virtual world, one could say “I am my avatar, and the person that is me is inescapable.” Most tech savvy members of internet chat communities might initially disagree with this statement, claiming that people can be whoever or whatever they want to be in virtual reality. Some might argue that we are limited only by our own imagination and the software available in the creation of these representations of ourselves, or avatars. Internet Relay Chat, website forums, message boards, and Multi User Dimensions (MUDs) are all traditionally text-based online interfaces and rarely use the term “avatar” to mean anything other than a postage stamp sized picture associated with your online nickname. Other “worlds” have a 3D interface that allows users to create a virtual you, and the degree of verisimilitude depends on the software tools and the user’s desires. Because of this assumption about the limitless abilities in creating one’s own virtual identity, there is an implied freedom in traveling through 3D online communities that leads a woman to believe that she no longer carries with her the imprints of her life from the physical world – that it is voluntary whether she wants to take the perspectives and associations from her physical world into a virtual community. However, just as our human bodies and mode of communication encase our personalities and tend to shade other people’s opinions of

the person that we are, avatars and chat also present a specific image and influence those who we encounter. I have noticed a striking trend among women in my favorite online community, and it leads me to believe that shedding this gender skin is close to impossible, that it comprises as much of our identity as anything else. In an attempt to define those differences in 3D chat communities, I interviewed several people, and I performed an informal experiment among friends.

After being a member of several 3D internet chat communities in the past, I followed up on a suggestion from an online friend and checked out *Second Life*, the latest cyberculture incarnation of Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*. I noticed that *Second Life* possessed some qualities that separated it from other chat communities like *Cybertown*, *The Sims Online*, and *World of Warcraft*. First, *Second Life* uses one of the most advanced programs of custom avatar rendering software available among online communities, providing a fuller, more realistic representation of oneself. For example, you can make your avatar almost any size, any height, or any skin color with very realistic texturing. More importantly, *Second Life* is not a "game" that has specified objectives or quests like many other 3D communities. Often, these role-playing communities like *Runescape* or *Entropyia* are held together by a common objective (for example, kill the dragon, earn points), and success in that community is defined by clearly outlined goals. Any socialization in those virtual worlds is incidental to the ultimate goal. Often in the public chat areas in these other online worlds, the words spoken by people are largely buying and selling. Short, truncated sentences like "selling 100 iron ore for 2000gp" and "buying uncut gems" fill the screen. In contrast, *Second Life* is knitted together to function as a cooperative, "natural" community. While there is still a great deal of commerce in *Second Life*, much more philosophical and social interaction exists in chat. The creators, Linden Lab, use this concept as their main selling feature: this is a virtual interface that extends the borders of our world into the Metaverse, or virtual landscape. *Second Life* is a robust, viable community. Within those 3D boundaries, any resident of SL can experience what others create and offer their own individual contribution. There is a widely popular and healthy economy through online commerce (the buying and selling of virtual goods) that generates several thousand dollars each day. For the artistically

minded, there are live music performances by residents almost every day streamed over the internet, gallery openings that display real world art, weekly poetry readings, and several building competitions where users challenge one another to create virtual objects. And, of course, there is always discourse. Beyond the official think tank groups that schedule regular meetings to discuss various topics, *Second Life* contains several hundred of the sharpest and most creative minds online. This virtual space is often hailed among users as the Utopian construct for societal values – life as it should be.

For over 10 years, I have had a genderless nickname; entering the virtual world, I assumed my gender was not a significant part of my identity. My goals online were never romantic but intellectual and social. I thought I could check my gender, like baggage, at the gate before I disembarked. Likewise, I assumed all my perceptions about gender from my “other life” would not automatically transfer. I have always been drawn to the 3D visual element in online communities, and this often mandates a gender assignment with one’s avatar. However, it never occurred to me that I might act differently as a female as opposed to a male-presenting avatar. Writers like Susan Herring maintain that males and females interact very differently in text based chat environments: males use more aggressive verb choices and women tend to focus on building harmony and connection between users. Recently, before doing further research, I conducted an informal experiment of my own to see the online world from a different perspective.

I still used my *Second Life* nickname, recognized among friends as a female avatar, but I became a male avatar for a week. Most male avatars in *Second Life* and other 3D chat communities are virtual Apollos, heavily muscled and tanned. In contrast, I molded my male shape according to what I thought was attractive and unique: Elf Boi (as my friends call him) is tall and slender with broad shoulders. He wears jewelry and eye makeup, and I created him with a slightly multi-sexual appearance, because I kept some of my female avatar’s sharper facial features. After the initial strangeness of chatting from a male avatar wore off, I found the experience liberating. I spent the better part of a week chatting with friends and strangers, recording my chat sessions to examine offline.

When going back over the chat history, I found that my “voice” had changed. My sentences were shorter, more direct, and filled with less chat detritus: meta-language like emoticons, laughter, and other emotional responses. I explained and elaborated less than I normally do in chat environments, and I “laughed” less. Perhaps I no longer felt a need to seek acceptance with my statements, so I didn’t need a “greaser” like “lol”. As a woman in chat communities, I gradually accepted the shorthand words like “lol” and “hehe” to demonstrate my enthusiasm over certain topics during chat. As a female, I often sought to create the jovial atmosphere that I wanted to experience, much like I probably would at a party, so I often kept the conversation focused on others, buoyant and quick paced. However, as a male avatar, I used more first person when chatting with others, and I found that I didn’t provide transitions or help in keeping a topic alive. As “Elf Boi,” there was a general “take it or leave it” attitude in my statements. All of this was quite surprising to me. When I did research on the differences between male and female discourse online, I found supporting evidence. Dr. Herring noted that a study with MUD communities by Cherny in 1994 revealed that “female-presenting characters used mostly neutral and affectionate verbs (such as ‘hugs’ and ‘whuggles’), while male characters used more violent verbs (such as ‘kills’), especially in actions directed towards other males.” (Herring CPSR). Herring also discovered that females used three times as many emoticons and representations of smiling and laughter as did males in IRC chat environments.

Perhaps the most interesting result of my “experiment” was witnessing the reactions of others. Many of my friends who knew me as a female avatar found the experience disconcerting. Men who knew my female avatar thought my male-presenting avatar was humorous at first, and then quickly displayed signs of discomfort like uncharacteristic quietness when I addressed them. While a female friend who I know in my actual life also found the switch disconcerting and told me so, other females found my new male avatar sexually attractive, commenting that I was the “perfect male” with a male avatar and a female brain. Were they encouraged by my pioneering efforts to take over a man’s arena, or were they attracted to the power I seemed to exude because of my change in voice? A few female friends actually pre-

ferred the male avatar to my female avatar and expressed disappointment if they saw me in female form. Did they view me as a less threatening alternative to a fully male person online? There is no way to really confirm any of this; I had already established my identity as a woman among these friends. Likewise, I did not notice any significant changes in behavior among strangers in *Second Life* when I chatted using a male avatar.

While examining the effects of gender impersonation online, I thought of the women and men who become opposite sex avatars. What were their goals in representing the opposite gender? Among online users, it is commonly accepted that the majority of men who assume female presenting avatars are doing so for two main reasons: to role-play a character and to elicit cyber sex from another woman. Men who use female avatars for role-playing purposes usually state outright in their profiles or in a conversation that this female avatar is their “character.” Men who use female avatars to engage in cyber sex are often discovered without much effort; the main topic of conversation with them is almost always sex. Women joke online about how to “out” a badly impersonated woman. Usually, they identify particular indicators: a lack of feminine demeanor, no attention to detail with the female avatar’s shape and dress, and blunt vocabulary.

On the other hand, I know many men in *Second Life* who don’t fall into these two categories, men who are neither role-playing nor carrying any hidden sexual agenda. Sean Gorham, a male who has a female-presenting avatar in *Second Life*, is remarkably different. His profile states, “I switch avatars on a whim. If I look different than my pic, don't be shocked. Get to know me, not my appearance! I'm a guy in R[eal] L[ife] . . . No, I'm not T\* in any way. I'm very comfortable with my RL identity. I genderblend because I can, and because it's fun. If I wanted to be me in SL, I'd log out and go look in the mirror.” I asked him about his motives for using a female avatar in world, and he replied, “Like I said in my profile, I don't consider myself T\*[ransvestite] in R[eal] L[ife]. I like being a guy, I don't crossdress in RL. What I really wish I could do . . . is switch, in RL, whenever I wanted . . . imagine how much we'd gain as a society—as a race—if we could do that across the gender barrier.” I asked another friend, Nala Galatea, the same question. Nala has a female avatar in *Second Life* and DJ’s a

streaming radio show with his partner Trinity Serpentine. He replied, "Well, for one thing, it was always about being a female in game. At the time I was feeling like I might be trans-gendered to some degree, and I wanted an outlet for my feminine side." He added, "And another thing, it's much more pleasant to be a female in games than a male." This surprised me, so I asked him to elaborate. He answered, "I'm not a butch guy, so it's easier to let my personality come through and have it attributed as a woman than as a man and not be thought gay."

In a conversation about his avatar's feminine gestures, Sean said, "I guess I figure if I'm going to look female, I should try to do what I can to present myself that way." When I asked him about noticeable differences in his use of language, he replied, "I know one thing I do differently when I'm wearing a female av[atar] . . . I almost never curse. At first I think it was just an affectation, but now it's a habit." This illuminates much of how Sean identifies what it is to be "female." When asked the same question, Nala replied that "women tend to express their emotions more through chat than men do. . . . I use a lot of laughs, giggles, and snickers when I talk. Most guys don't." I asked him if he used these kinds of expressions when he had a male avatar, and he replied, "I've done it and been accused of being a woman behind the screen." Additionally, Torley Torgeson, another male who uses a female avatar in *Second Life*, commented, "I've seen women use more emoticons and expressi[ive] gestures like \*grin\* or ~giggles~. I have not seen many men ~giggle~ . . . So there's more warmth in some way, I'd say readily." Nala also pointed out, "It's not just how I talk, but how I respond, too. Like when someone has bad news, I don't say 'That sucks.' I say 'Awwwwwwwwww' or \*hugs\* and reassur[e] the person emotionally. That's just me, but it's something very feminine that comes across."

Friends of Sean's have noticed occasional "male" type speech in conversations that reveal his real life masculinity. When complimenting the shape of his female avatar's body one evening, and the more than usual curves, Sean replied, "I know." The three women who were there all laughed, surprised by such a direct response. They agreed that two other responses were more typical for females: gratitude "why thank you!" or sexualizing the situation (even if playfully) "why don't you come and do something about it?" With regards to gender

cues in Internet Relay Chat, Herring notes “...users give off gender cues frequently (an average of once every 3-4 lines of text... such that the longer someone participates, the more likely it is that they will reveal their actual gender” (Herring CPSR).

When constructing my male avatar, I chose to create the avatar I most wanted to see on my screen. After interviewing several men with female-presenting avatars, I think this instinct is more common than consciously drawing upon the feminine or masculine parts of one’s own personality. This brought up another interesting discussion about what users desire to portray with their avatars. There are a few residents of *Second Life* who take pride in the fact that their avatars closely resemble their real life physical appearance, and these are also the users more likely to divulge personal information about themselves. Most residents, however, create a fantasy avatar based upon their concept of the “ideal body form,” whether humanoid or not. Many residents, myself included, are attempting to create something completely other in our humanoid shapes, and there is even a budding business within *Second Life* for skilled artisans who create custom avatars for less adept users.

Ultimately, there is no conclusive proof with gender roles in online communities. It was difficult to surmise whether these were social perceptions brought in from each user’s real life experiences about what constitutes “female behavior” in an online community environment or if any of these behaviors are learned within the chat community itself. However, after my research, I still feel as though men and women behave very differently within a chat environment. Lisa King notes that, even in *DC Web Women*, a women only chat environment, that “women use the communication styles of attenuated assertions, support, and questions” (King) just as Herring theorized. Likewise, women in *Second Life* who chat amongst themselves display the same supportive and community building behavior. While a chat community is not a true indicator of all women in society, merely those who are online, it does highlight some interesting trends for gender roles in general. Admittedly, the demographics are completely different. And, with regards to *Second Life*, the data is further skewed. For the most part, *Second Life* attracts a far greater percentage of intelligent and creative people, what we’d probably classify as marginal represen-

tations of society, nonconformists and non-participants in the dominant cultural ideology. However, *Second Life* is only one environment in which women and men signify their gender in their chat styles. And while there is no comprehensive way to measure their learned behavior and their acceptance of cultural norms, anthropologists have discovered online communities as a fascinating and educational way to study human behavior. One question does remain. Who can really know which people are male and female without voice chat? Any information garnered in this kind of environment has to be tested outside of it, which just introduces another medium and more influences to be considered.

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