HETERONORMATIVITY IN VIRTUAL WORLD DESIGN: CHARACTER CREATION AND THE LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PLAYFUL EXPRESSION IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT AND AMTGARD

A Thesis Submitted to the Committee on Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

in the Faculty of Arts and Science

TRENT UNIVERSITY

Peterborough, Ontario, Canada

Cultural Studies M.A. Graduate Program

September 2022

ABSTRACT

Heteronormativity in Virtual World Design: Character Creation and the Limitations and Opportunities for Playful Expression in World of Warcraft and Amtgard

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The purpose of this research is to highlight the limitations and opportunities for playful expression of gender identity in character creation systems of virtual worlds, and how these might work to reinforce, or disrupt, the heteronormative imperative. The primary sites considered in this analysis are the video game *World of Warcraft* and the live action role-playing game *Amtgard.* I provide evidence that while the *World of Warcraft's* character creation system is sexist and works to reinforce heteronormative ideology, *Amtgard's* relatively ambiguous design provides opportunity for disruption of these norms. Participant research with *Amtgard* players demonstrates actual instances of *Amtgard's* more flexible character creation system being utilized in expression and exploration of gender identity which resists the heteronormative imperative. Based on this, I call on game developers to reject designs which necessitate selection of gender from within the traditional binary and embrace more ambiguous design in development of character creation systems.

Keywords: Virtual Worlds, Live-Action Roleplaying, Avatars, Gender Identity, Play, Gender Performativity, Character Creation, Gender Politics, Game Design, World of Warcraft.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor for this project, Dr. Liam Mitchell. I initially had an entirely different thesis in mind, and he was very supportive in what turned out to be a substantial pivot in the material being considered. This in addition to disruptions to progress with participant research caused by the pandemic, and my desire to do additional research resulted in this project taking significantly longer than anticipated. I am truly appreciative for his assistance in pulling things together and guidance with articulating my arguments and ideas. My appreciation is also with my committee Dr. Paul Manning and Professor Karleen Pendleton Jiménez who agreed to participate in this process and review my thesis to give feedback and suggestions.

I also couldn't have done this without the support from the *Amtgard* community in the form of individual players who responded to my request for responses regarding their experience with the *Amtgard* character creation system. I am certain that having the privilege to share their stories not only added significant merit to my research, but also helped me to confirm that my assumptions regarding the benefits of better game design had real world implications for the people participating in these worlds.

I'd like to mention, broadly, my appreciation for all my professors, instructors, and peers at Trent University throughout my coursework in undergrade and graduate studies. Whether it was a course in humanities, gender studies, philosophy, or computer science, everyone who shared their knowledge

and perspectives helped in shaping my understanding of the ideas which brought me to this research project and played a part in its cultivation.

Finally, I'd like to thank my mother for lending an ear when I needed to talk through my ideas and for providing her feedback on the concepts I was working to articulate. Also, my two cats who listened more passively, but still provided a sounding board for working out my ideas.

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Introduction

A friend and I walked through a local park in early July of 2016, enjoying the sun and fresh air, our eyes drifting regularly to our phones. Our attention was on our mobile devices not because we were expecting messages, or because we had grown bored of the outdoors, but because we were on the hunt for digital creatures called Pokémon. *Pokémon Go* had just been released, and we were completely hooked. We had been out on the city trails and streets for a couple hours already and we would likely be outside playing on our phones for the rest of the afternoon. *Pokémon Go* allows you to search for Pokémon by using location data from your smartphone's GPS to display your avatar on an animated map which mimics the features of the real world and renders the virtual creatures around you. The position of your avatar in *Pokémon Go's* virtual map mirrors your physical position in the real world; As such your avatar moves when you do and is your representative in the world of *Pokémon Go* in a rather direct way.

My friend and I found ourselves in a location which lacked in-game creatures or objects to interact with, so we turned our attention to personalizing our in-game avatars. While we were doing this, I happened to mention my disappointment at the lack of options for my "male" avatar in the game menus. My friend seemed to disagree, and we wondered if their selection of the "female" avatar had afforded them a different experience. It turned out that this

was the case, and differences in the available options for customizing one's avatar available quickly became apparent across the categories, from available footwear to the conspicuous absence of a "necklace" category for male avatars, which is illustrated below.

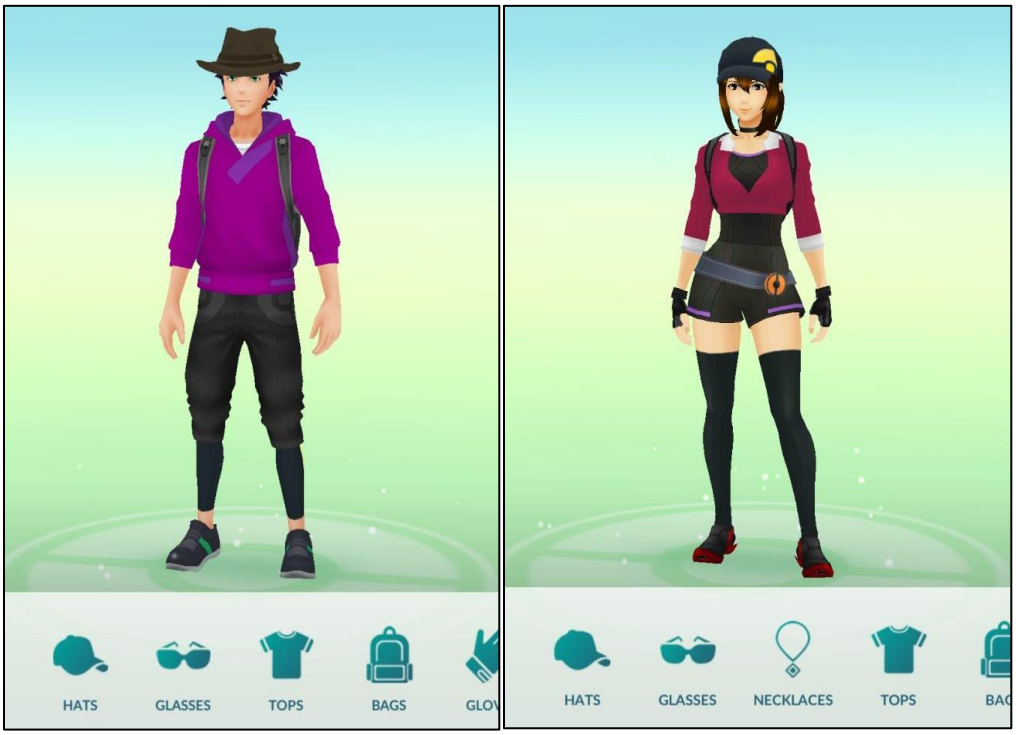

Figure 1 - Necklace category is exclusive to female avatars.

The category of "bottoms" does well to illustrate the difference between options for each gender in the game with the most obvious deviation being the number of items available for each gender. As can be seen, dresses and skirts are specific to the female avatar, which results in over twice as many options. In addition, and putting aside the obvious variance between items available, the difference in design of each gender's "shorts" draws attention. The image below illustrates both a male and female avatar equipped with their version of "shorts"

and shows that the female interpretation is significantly shorter in length compared to the male interpretation descending well below the knee.

Figure 2 - Avatar style options for bottoms; male on left and female on right.

Given that the female avatar's only options in this category, other than these petite shorts, are relatively short skirts, a dress, and leggings, it is clear that these clothing options are sexist and representative of gender normative ideals. Design choices such as these make apparent the existence of differences placed into *Pokémon Go*'s virtual space between the virtual "male" avatars and the virtual "female" avatars by the game designers. It is worth noting as well that selection of gender precedes the materialization of the player's avatar in the game world, and the ability of the player to play the game at all. This appears to echo the way most individuals are assigned a gender at birth before entering society, and have that difference reaffirmed by repeated exposure to gendered norms and sexist ideals. And just as the gender assignment of male or female is

required to participate in the virtual world of *Pokémon Go* it is often the case in our society that gender within this binary is a requirement for participation in civic and social activities. For example, in many countries identification as male or female is required for government documentation such as passports, there is still a fair bit of controversy over male/female division in recreational and professional sports, and unless I am mistaken membership in fraternities and sororities are generally still reserved for males and females, respectively.

The design of *Pokémon Go* entangles the player's selection of gender with their manifestation of an avatar in the game world, and with becoming an agent therein. Furthermore, *Pokémon Go* appears to reinforce the engendered avatar over time, not with language, but with the reinforcement of stereotypical tropes of gender normative binary males and females. It should also be noted that the players' selection of gender is portrayed in terms of a traditional gender binary, and though not labelled with words, the avatar graphics clearly indicate normative male/female options. You cannot identify as non-binary in *Pokémon Go*.

In games where the player's position in the game world is represented by an avatar it is common for the player to be prompted to specify their gender as male or female early in the character creation process, so this might all seem rather typical to those with gaming experience. It stood out for me though because while gender and clothing do not directly impact gameplay mechanics in *Pokémon Go*, this experience led me to wonder about other games where it

might. I considered the possibility that the avatar's gender is not necessarily only a factor in the avatar's appearance but can also be a factor that informs how the player can exist in the world. This was significant to me because it brought my attention to the phenomenon of avatar gender impacting gameplay, but in truth there are many more robust examples of avatar's gender having significant impact on the paths open to the player in the game world. It should be mentioned that because *Pokémon Go* is a multiplayer game, and the player's avatar is shown to other players there is likely an impact on how the player is perceived (and perhaps how they are treated) by other players, due to preconceived notions and biases regarding gender. However, there are games where more than outfits, appearance and social interactions with other players might be affected by this initial decision of selecting a gender to be represented as in the game.

The title *Mount and Blade Warband*, a classic single player role playing game with a large cult following, offers an excellent example of this. In this game the player can attempt to become ruler of all the lands through warfare and diplomacy; however, the developers purposefully program gender bias and heteronormativity into the medieval game world, which makes it so that choosing a female character makes this goal significantly more difficult to achieve. As a female player in *Mount and Blade Warband*, non-player characters in the game will treat you as less competent than male lords, with your ability and intelligence regularly brought into question. Furthermore, the base game

limits whom you can marry to those of the opposite gender, which in turn changes the gameplay experience and options depending on the gender selected in character creation.

This is not to say that playing this game as a female is less interesting or less fun, and it is possible that these sorts of direct representations of sexism can be progressive in certain cases; One could imagine a version of the game that criticizes these portrayals of gender even while including them. It is simply an example of how selection of gender in the game works to reinforce normative stereotypes of gender within a set binary. Also, it is worth mentioning that a fan made modification for the game, entitled *Diplomacy*, eliminates the game's inherent heteronormative bias, and works to diminish instances of overt sexism. Specifically, non-player character bias is removed from the code, sexist dialogue is neutralized, and the character may marry anyone in the game regardless of the gender selected by the player. It is important to note here that the destruction or exclusion of gender or sexuality as factors in gameplay is not always the right approach either; One cannot eliminate gender discrimination by pretending that gender does not exist. The reason I have mentioned this game modification and find it fascinating, is because of how it works to illustrate that these differences in gameplay options and experience related to gender are in fact something that is crafted into the world, and that these can be omitted from or removed from the world as well.

This idea that gendered mechanics are often integrated into the design of virtual worlds in games will be a central focus of this study. More specifically I intend to highlight the ways in which character creation serves to reinforce heteronormative imperatives through the necessitation of gendered character creation mechanics, and through the way that games realize these gendered player avatars in virtual worlds where the player then exists. This will be done, in large part, through examination of the design of the most popular massive multiplayer online role-playing game, *World of Warcraft*, which boasts over 1 million daily players and an estimated 120 million total players/subscribers at the time of writing (MMO Populations, 2022). Additionally, this features a significant body of scholarly writing to draw on regarding the game design and player experience. It is possible to design game worlds without including gender bias in design choices, and this will be illustrated through examination of game systems which exclude gender from their character creation and gameplay mechanics. For this I will be looking primarily at the popular Live Action Role Playing Game (LARP), *Amtgard*, and will even be sharing testimonials and stories from *Amtgard* players to better understand the impact of these design choices on individuals in the game world.

The first chapter considers the work of Judith Butler and Donna Haraway in relation to gender performativity, expression, and heteronormativity. This is an essential starting point as their arguments regarding gender politics and identity are critical in underpinning my analysis of gender in virtual worlds. The

second chapter concerns virtual worlds, avatar embodiment and play, and includes discussion of writing by Tom Boellstorf, Sherry Turkle, and Marta M. Kania regarding virtual worlds and avatar embodiment, as well as Johan Huizinga and Miguel Sicart regarding the concept of and importance of play. Boellstorf's work is important here to articulate a working definition of a virtual world and Sicart is equally important for claim regarding the potential of play, and playgrounds (or game worlds) to be sites of resistance through their potential for ambiguity which is disruptive to societal norms and constructs. My third chapter considers how gender is designed in popular contemporary virtual game worlds with analysis of *World of Warcraft* as well as discussion of *Rust* and *Cyberpunk2077. Rust* and *Cyberpunk 2077* are included here for their unique approaches to gender design in their respective games, and *World of Warcraft* will be treated to a specific and in-depth analysis of its character creation process and avatar design. This analysis of gender in *World of Warcraft* will be supported by writing from William Bainsbridge, Hilde Corneliussen and Bonnie Nardi. The purpose of this chapter is assessment and critique of how gender is often designed into the character creation systems of video game worlds. Chapter four focuses on review of the game design, gameplay, character creation process, and game mechanics of *Amtgard*. This overview is important in understanding the potential and merit of *Amtgard's* ambiguous character creation system, and discussion of this is also included in this chapter. The final chapter contains an overview of the participant research portion of this project,

including the inquiry process and consideration of my positionality as a researcher. I will share the details of the responses from participants and provide analysis of the stories and comments provided to demonstrate how the design of *Amtgard's* character creation system is utilized by actual players in meaningful acts of expression, self-exploration, and resistance against heteronormative ideology.

The primary objective of this study might be summarized as an appeal to game designers to move towards more open and ambiguous game design, especially in the realm of character creation. In other words, a call for design which does not limit players by forcing them to immediately lock themselves into a gendered binary as a cost of entry for experiencing the game world.

Chapter One: Gender Performativity, Expression, and Materiality

Introduction:

To begin examining gender identity and representation in virtual worlds it is essential to articulate and discuss the concepts of heteronormativity, gender performativity and the materiality of gendered bodies as this will build a foundation for consideration of how gender is handled in game design. It is my intent that outlining and discussing these key concepts related to gender theory will assist drawing meaningful analysis of how the design of character creation systems in games can work to reinforce, or resist, heteronormative ideology.

Butler's Account of the Oppressive Nature of Heteronormativity:

In this chapter I will be exploring the concept of performative discourse concerning the "materiality of the body" in Judith Butler's work *Bodies That Matter and* discuss how this might be applied to the materiality of avatars as digital bodies (*ix*). In *Bodies That Matter* Judith Butler examines "the constraints by which bodies are materialized as 'sexed'," while suggesting that "bodies" are only apparent and understood "within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schema" (ix). Butler is quick to note in the preface that bodies and what makes up what we consider a body seems to extend

beyond the physical state of the body, and furthermore, that these same external elements seemed "quite central to what bodies are" (*ix*,). Bodies are understood, most often in our society as male or female, and this binary encoding is understood as both normal and scientifically sound. Butler will argue however, that "sex is from the start normative", and is a "regulatory force" with the power to produce" (1). By this they mean sex is not a state of physicality but rather "an ideal" which is brought into being and normalized over time (1). This leads us to an understanding of how "sex" is constructed by concepts which exist outside the body, rather than "a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed," (2-3). Butler further supports this claim of sex as a constructed ideal rather than biological state by pointing out that sex is in fact "a construction, offered within language." (5). If both "gender" and "sex" are the product of discourse, then it stands to reason that they are both in fact constructed socially (Butler 5). Because the heteronormative imperative is produced socially as an ideal, we can understand it as being connected to the imperative of the male female binary. In other words, the concept of heteronormativity is part of the phantasm of gender binary which Butler would claim to be a social construct rather than a biological fact. To be clear most people would consider gender as constructed and sex as material, however Butler's point is that both gender and sex are in fact constructed.

With this argument for sex as a socially constructed ideal, rather than simply a biological state, in mind, a related argument of Butler's can be

examined. This is that the "regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion… to materialize the body's sex," (2). When considering the "performativity" to which Butler refers it is important to understand they are referring more to ongoing discourse, a "reiterative and citational practice" as opposed to single performative utterances (for example, a judge's ruling of guilty in the justice system) (2). Butler's general claim is that this ongoing discourse produces the materiality of the body and constitutes our understanding of the body. In terms of understanding individual construction of gender identity, their example of "medical interpellation" works to demonstrate both a subject which "emerges" through "gendering", and the citational function of performative discourse in reinforcing these norms over time (7). Butler's focus here is on the materialization of the body, through "gendering", and the "performativity" by which "reiteration" of the "norms of sex… constitute the materiality of bodies" (2, 7). It is my intent to utilize these ideas regarding the materiality of bodies help clarify how the design of game spaces could work to reiterate dominant ideologies.

Our earlier example of character creation in *Pokémon Go* can be examined alongside this idea to illustrate how it might hold weight in creation of virtual avatar bodies. In *Pokémon Go* there is an initial declaration of gender performed by the character which occurs when they select a gender before starting play. This could be considered alongside the initial declaration of sex in Butler's example of medical interpellation whereby the infant is designated as a

boy or a girl. It should be noted that there is a difference here, since the baby does not choose their own gender, whereas the player in a game does select a gender, furthermore it should be acknowledged that the declaration of this with regards to a human's physical body is qualitatively different from the selection with regards to a person's avatar, or digital body. However, the important point to consider is not the agent who does the declaring of gender, but rather that the gender of the infant, and the in-game avatar, must be declared as a sort of cost of entry into the world. The reinforcement of this declaration occurs in society as a feature of language and gendered culture. Gendered language, such as he/her, his/hers, as well as accepted cultural practices, or constructed ideas regarding preferred colours, activities and etiquette are some of the mechanisms by which difference is established between the two genders.

Figure 3 - Young Franklin Roosevelt.

An excellent example of these reiterative mechanisms is the marketing of clothing for infants and small children, which at present are most often targeted towards a specific gender with blue being understood as indicating and being appropriate for males and pink being similarly considered for females. Jo B. Paoletti points out however, that this was not always the case, and in the past, it

would be common for all children to don white dresses for reasons of practicality. Paoletti also points out that even as pinks and blues were determined to be suitable colours for children, the present associations were not immediately adopted by society, with some early sources often suggesting that pink would be appropriate for boys and blue best for girls. Paoletti notes an example of this from 1918 which states “The generally accepted rule is pink for the boys, and blue for the girls. The reason is that pink, being a more decided and stronger color, is more suitable for the boy, while blue, which is more delicate and dainty, is prettier for the girl.” According to Paoletti, present day biases were not established until the 1940’s and were a result of decisions made by manufacturers and retailers, with Paoletti suggesting that it could very possibly have “gone the other way” with pink being seen as proper for boys and blue being as such for girls. Our reason for pointing out this cultural event is supporting the argument that societies ideals regarding gender are, as Butler states, established and reinforced by factors and practices external to the body itself. This gendering of children’s clothing led to a shift from children’s attire such as can be seen in the image below of a young Franklin Roosevelt, to the modern conception of children’s attire where boys would be imagined with “a blue overall with a teddy bear holding a football” (Paoletti).

Colleen Callaghan, author of *Is It a Girl or A Boy? Gender Identity and Children’s Clothing* writes of this as well in their article titled “History of Children’s Clothing”:

> Before the early-twentieth century, clothing worn by infants and young children shared a distinctive common feature-their clothing lacked sex distinction… Previously, both males and females of all ages (except for swaddled infants) had worn some type of gown, robe, or tunic… To modern eyes, it may appear that when little boys of the past were attired in skirts or dresses, they were dressed "like girls," but to their contemporaries, boys and girls were simply dressed alike in clothing appropriate for small children.

This discussion of children's clothing is important because it helps ground the idea that gendered norms are a societal construct. The fluid nature of these norms in relation to "the history of children's clothing" reveals something interesting regarding "gender roles" and how the associations society carries regarding male and female aesthetics are not essential but rather are contrived. In the non-virtual world gender norms are reinforced at an early age with clothing and accessory options with different styles of attire and clothing colours that are, as I have shown, constructed and non-essential. If you recall our example in *Pokémon Go* these differences in attire associated with each gender also exist as choices in game design. These are contrived and, as I will demonstrate, it is the case in many games that the reinforcement of gender binary and difference in gender manifests itself as difference in visual aesthetics, as well as divergent options for avatar customization.

To put it another way, the construction of the digital bodies gendered materiality in virtual worlds can be found in the design of player's avatars in virtual worlds. Just as discourse must be encoded in linguistics, operation in a virtual world must be encoded as input to the program through the user interface. Game worlds are typically designed with this same binary, a selection of male and female (however there are some exceptions which I will examine in later chapters). This is reflected in dual options for male and female even in races which are non-human and are fantastical and alien. It appears a default engenderment of digital bodies is seen as important for allowing similarly engendered players to relate to their digital forms. While there are exceptions, and programmed allowances which afford the opportunity to take on less engendered digital persona, our aim here is to highlight the pervasiveness of programming which assumes a sexual binary in understanding and representing a user through their avatar's aesthetics. I believe this design choice is a digital example of the ongoing discourse which Butler argues is responsible for the construction and reiteration of gender binaries in our society.

Butler states in *Gender Trouble* that "gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense always a doing." (25) They describe this with reference to "Nietzsche's claim in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that 'there is no 'being' behind the doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer; is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.'" (25) Butler writes that "There is not gender identity behind the

expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results." (25) In "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" from *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* Butler elaborates on the concept of gender as being "performative", in the context of "consolidated phantasms" of binary gender, which "posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real" (313). In this work, their account of gender materiality highlights the process by which the subject's gender is constituted (or performed), in the context of fabricated hegemonic ideals. Butler states that gender performance may be understood as compulsory as though it manifests at the site of the subject, it is informed, and performed in the context of normative assumptions. Additionally, Butler suggests that gender normative ideology, as a form of ideological "oppression", "works not merely through acts of overt prohibition, but covertly, through the constitution of viable subjects and through the corollary constitution of a domain of unviable (un)subjects – abjects, we might call them- who are neither named nor prohibited…" (312).

This raises concerns regarding the apparent reiteration of heteronormativity present in constructed game worlds which, by way of their design, often insist on players adopting/confirming between binary male/female gender representations prior to materialization of the player's avatar. In other words, under a reading of Butler, it becomes apparent that a game design which necessitates the adoption of a binary gendered identity, mechanically reinforces gender "norms" and contributes to the "consolidation of the heterosexual

imperative" by way of the player's embodiment of the character/avatar which materializes, and makes real, representations of traditional gender binaries (2). The heterosexual imperative discussed here creates an idealized male/female binary, which individuals are assumed to populate, while rendering identities which fall outside this binary and its imperative impossible. These individuals who do not subscribe to the imperative are what Butler terms the unviable, unsubjects, and abjects. The problem, of course, is the relegation of those that do not ascribe to the heteronormative imperative to the realm of unthinkability, their consideration as being less than those who do, and the way they are excluded from our understanding of what identity a person might possess.

As has been stated, games demonstrate this exclusion in practice through the mechanic of gender selection in character creation. In many cases, the individual must conform to one of the binary options presented by the game, or they will not be able to participate in the game world. This is part of why virtual game worlds have been selected as the focus of this study. In the real world we have examples of gendered spaces which bar individuals who don't ascribe to the heteronormative imperative from participation. These people still exist in the world, but society often requests their identification as either female or male to participate in many aspects of society. In virtual worlds we find something similar, where selection, or self-identification as one of the two genders in the binary becomes a cost of entry to participate in the virtual space. Furthermore, as has been discussed and will be demonstrated in this paper, once a gender has

been selected, the perceived difference of the genders in relation to the heteronormativity is readily and frequently reinforced via gameplay mechanics and options for character customization.

Haraway and The Post Gender Potential of Cyborgs and Homo Cyber:

Our considerations regarding the gendered body are complemented by Donna Haraway's "post-human" account of gender *in Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*. In this writing Haraway opens with critique of Western perspectives of essence and physiology citing Western philosophy's concept of "the body politic… citizen, city and cosmos", as a "union of political and physiological" factors which in past and present provides "justification" for "domination" (7-8). This domination is "based on differences seen as natural", which are perceived as "inescapable and therefore moral" (8). It is Haraway's claim that these stories, including "knowledge from the natural sciences", are used in the domination of women and others considered different (8). Haraway's claim regarding the construction of categories to dominate and suppress "others considered different" echoes Butler's arguments regarding the those who do not fit into the established gender binary being rendered abject, unviable, and unthinkable. Haraway's argument regarding the establishment and reproduction of the narrative which facilitates these categories is that they are manufactured by the dominant cultural group (authored by men), as a system which "naturalizes" the

differences of “race, sex, and class” in service of functional exploitation of others (2). In other words, these systems of cultural knowledge are naturalized to perpetuate the oppression of those who are not men, by men for the purpose of maintaining power over others.

Technology can certainly reinforce heteronormativity, such as with gendered character selection, but some claim that it can offer a site of resistance which defies a variety of social norms. Beyond reinforcing our claim that binary gender narratives serve to oppress individuals who do not ascribe to heteronormativity, Haraway’s writing is important in our discussions because it describes an opportunity to transcend this oppressive narrative through individual embodiment in the landscapes of digital technology. As she notes, her writing is about “the invention and reinvention of nature” and so just as these systems of cultural knowledge have been constructed, they may be reconstructed, with possibilities for more progressive and inclusive understandings of gender having opportunity to find footing in digital landscapes (1). Specifically, Haraway states; “I do not know of any other time in history when there was greater need for political unity to effectively confront the dominations of 'race', 'gender', 'sexuality', and 'class'. I also do not know of any other time when the kind of unity we might help build could have been possible.” (157). There is an obvious call to action here in resisting established systems of power, and a claim that current circumstances would allow such a movement of resistance and “cyborg feminism” is the key to her vision (1). To

summarize, Haraway's claim is that the cyborg is "post-gender", and through cyborg identities a "world without gender" could be imagined (150).

In her writing Haraway points to a shift in language regarding objects and persons as indicating a shift in our understanding of objects and persons which suggests potential to foster new world views. This shift is described by Haraway as "movement from an organic, industrial society to a polymorphous, information system", and points to linguistic "dichotomies" indicating this movement, which she styles "the informatics of domination" (161). Examples of linguistic dichotomies presented by Haraway include focus shifting from of "perfection" to "optimization", and "reproduction" to "replication" (161). She insists these updated terms "cannot be coded as natural", which "subverts" the natural coding for traditional values (162). Written over 30 years ago, this seems even more relevant at present, given modern trends in digital construction of identity (Turkle 151-153). Another way to frame this argument is as a movement from thinking terms in of "essential properties", to considering things as they exist as part of a system (Haraway 162). This premise of digitization extends, in Haraway's view to humans as well, as she argues "Any objects or persons can be reasonably thought of in terms of disassembly and reassembly; no 'natural' architectures constrain system design." (162) In this way, we can understand humans in a manner other than the categories and hierarchies conveyed in Western origin stories and accounts of natural sciences. Rather, humans can be

understood as part of a greater system, with attention drawn to what connects us rather than what divides us. Haraway speaks to this directly, stating:

> Human beings, like any other component or subsystem, must be localized in a system architecture whose basic modes of operation are probabilistic, statistical. No objects, spaces, or bodies are sacred in themselves; any component can be interfaced with any other if the proper standard, the proper code, can be constructed for processing signals in a common language. (163)

Haraway believes that this new understanding of human beings as "biotic components" as opposed to "objects of knowledge" lays the foundation for a "recrafting" of our embodied identities, and facilitation of "new social relations." (164) The cyborg, as a "disassembled and reassembled… personal self", represents a clean slate for constructing and enforcing new stories about the self (Haraway 163). This cyborg self, Haraway writes, is the one which "feminists must code" (163).

Haraway's interest in cyborg identity alludes to an opportunity for a posthuman understanding of the body which does away with traditional gender binaries. Specifically, when Haraway writes "I am making an argument for the cyborg as a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings." and that "The cyborg is a creature in a post-gender world" it indicates her belief that cyborg identities are

far enough removed from the dominant stories in our culture that they allow for the creation of new social realities (150). It is my opinion that the virtual spaces of games, if designed properly, could function in such a way as to resist gender normative stories and schema. By this same logic though, they could be designed to reiterate normative gender imperatives through designs which make mandatory selection of gender and subsequent interpellation of gendered avatar bodies in these virtual spaces. It was noted earlier that Butler suggests the body be considered beyond the physical state of the body, and that external elements are in fact quite central to what bodies are; I would venture here that digital avatars exist as elements of the body which exist beyond the physical form, while still working in a way which constitutes the self. The chapter which follows will examine the materiality of virtual avatars in games and consider how these cyborg aspects play a role in social identity and self-constitution.

Chapter Two: Avatar Embodiment, Virtual Worlds and Play

Introduction:

An important concept in this writing is the idea that the virtual body of a player's avatar can act as an extension of the self which functions as a conduit for expression, experience, and construction of identity. In this chapter attention will be given to this idea that avatars function as such an extension of the player and suggest that both the materiality of the avatar and the experiences of the game world, via the virtual avatar body, can impact the player, and be substantial in their understanding of themselves in relation to others and to the world outside the game. I will begin with review of Huizinga's account of play, before moving on to consider specific writings concerning avatar's materiality, and the avatar as a mode of virtual selfhood. Huizinga is important to mention here for his efforts in laying the groundwork for consideration of play and the features of spaces intended for play. Though I disagree with Huizinga on some of the characteristics he ascribes to play spaces, the framework he puts forward is still useful in our discussion of play. Boellstorff's writing will be utilized in establishing a definition of what constitutes a virtual world which will be important in making an argument for the game worlds which arise from Live Action Role-playing games, such as *Amtgard*, as being virtual worlds, even though they are not digital. Finally, I will examine Sicart's claim regarding the potential of play, and playgrounds (or game worlds) to be sites of resistance

through their potential for ambiguity which is disruptive to societal norms and constructs.

Play & The Magic Circle:

In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, Johan Huizinga suggests play as being "distinct from 'ordinary' life" and taking place in "temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (9-10). While discussing the features of play, as a function of culture, he elaborates on this "separation from ordinary life", as a "closed space" which is "marked out" for the purpose of play, "either materially or ideally", while producing a "consecrated space", or "magic circle" which finds significance in being "hedged off from the everyday" (19-20). Though Huizinga would stress the separation from ordinary life as a feature of play, it is well worth noting that many contemporary authors assert the potential for play to affect an individual and their life outside of the play space. I would not go so far, however, as to challenge the claim that play is distinct from the everyday as this distinctness is a feature which gives participants opportunity for experiences of the self, one that they might not have access to in the realm of the ordinary world.

This idea that distinctness fosters opportunity is echoed by the authors I will be citing in this chapter. They also note, however, that though distinct, these realms of play are still entangled with our ordinary and everyday realities. In

other words, though they do stand apart from the everyday, they are connected and so what happens in play can affect the everyday and the individual just as events and experiences occurring in the everyday might change someone. The concept of play generating a "magic circle" has been adopted by contemporary writers, such as Boellstorff, Taylor, and Nardi, who propose MMORPGs as spaces which, by distinction from the everyday, provide noteworthy opportunity for identity work and exploration of the self in relation to others. These works which consider the significance of digital embodiment will be considered broadly, before focusing on contemporary academic texts which explore the nature of virtual worlds, avatars, and digital embodiment. In the following chapter I will examine specific examples of MMORPGs, including *World of Warcraft*, in terms of culture and gameplay design.

Defining Virtual Worlds & Avatars:

In *Coming of Age in Second Life: An Anthropologist Explores the Virtually Human*, Tom Boellstorff offers a useful definition of virtual worlds which necessitates "social immersion" as the "constitutional ground for homo cyber (the virtual human)" and argues "single-player video games" are thus "less definitively virtual worlds" (115). This definition of immersion in virtual worlds as being necessitated by social immersion will be critical in considering the world of *Amtgard* as constituting a form of virtual culture through its augmentation of

physical space, rather than the construction of a digital environment. That is to say that even though *Amtgard* lacks pixels and digital data, the world of *Amtgard* should still be considered virtual as it represents a world distinct from our own, which players explore together. It could even be considered a sort of augmented reality game world (much like *Pokémon Go*) as the physical world is occupied by individuals who move through it while interacting with elements of a fantastical world which are represented (and in way superseded) by a shared virtual reality which the players experience as the game world. This is in line with Boellstorf's account of the "actual world as becoming at least partially immersed in the virtual world", with an emphasis on "social immersion" over "sensory immersion" (116).

Following this, Boellstorf writes that for residents in the online massive multi-player world *Second Life*, the site facilitated "identity-producing interactions", and furthermore that "Avatars… were the modality through which residents experienced virtual selfhood." (120, 129). In *Amtgard* we might wonder if there are avatars, and I would argue that indeed there are. Though they might not be digital, each player's physical body is cloaked in the game world of *Amtgard* by features of their character through use of garb (or costumes), by cosmetics and accessories, as well as by the character narratives they weave in the game space. The statement of a player as to who their character in the game world, as well as the adornments and acts which represent and reinforce this claim, thus work to produce a separate entity which

functions as the player character's avatar, with the physical body acting as a representation of location and action in the game world. This is not unlike other augmented reality games where a digital avatar would be based on, or anchored by the physical body, while remaining distinct. In both cases, the player's physical body is cloaked by their avatar. The difference is simply the materiality of the avatar, but in both cases, there is a difference established between the player and the character they are playing. In *Amtgard* this distinction is often expressed by the act of holding one's hands on their head to indicate an "out of character" moment. In this case the character avatar is indicated as being displaced by the player, for the purpose of the player themselves wishing to express something outside of the game world and play scenario. In this instance it is understood that this is not the character speaking or acting, but rather the player.

Understanding Avatars as a Mode of Virtual Selfhood:

"Are you more comfortable singing behind a virtual persona than you are on a real stage? Your reality TV show has arrived… Fox is launching a 'world's first; avatar singing competition series that will have celebrity judges gather in real life to gauge the performances of amateur singers who use avatars…" (Fingas 2021). Outside of gaming I can think of no better demonstration of the importance of avatar personas in modern culture than this quote from an article outlining plans

for an upcoming show on Fox where contestants in a singing competition will perform as digital avatars. This series titled “Alter Ego” is meant as a sort of spin off of the *Masked Singer* which is a singing competition show where performers are masked as they perform in front of judges and an audience. The title alter ego here reveals something interesting about the premise for this show, specifically in that the definition of alter ego is “a second self or different version of oneself” (Meriam Webster, 2021). What is interesting here is that the definition suggests that the avatar is being considered by the producers as an aspect of the self. We can contrast this to the definition of “Mask” as related to *The Masked Singer*, which reads as “something that serves to conceal or disguise” to see why this is so notable (Meriam Webster, 2021). Though both the mask and the avatar work both to displace the appearance of the physical body, the producers seem to acknowledge that the avatar works as an extension of the person and their identity. The function of an avatar as a part of the self and its role in identity and selfhood will be the focus of this section.

To understand that materiality and essential characteristics of the avatar even further, I will now examine the work of Marta M. Kania, author of *Perspectives of the Avatar: Sketching the Existential Aesthetics of Digital Games*. In this book Kania introduces the concept of the “self-avatar” as a method to express “that the player’s perspective and situatedness within the gameworld cannot be experienced as separate from the avatar”, and describes the self-avatar as “an emergent being situated within the gameworld; consisting of the

player's existence and intentional acts, as well as the features of the avatar" (6). This is important because it reinforces the idea that the avatar functions as the mechanism by which players experience the game world and draws attention to the importance of the features of the avatar. Kania goes on to discuss the avatar as a "creation" of the player by which "she weaves herself into the game" (13). Though the player creates the avatar according to Kania she writes of it as an "artefact" of the game world while stressing that it may be considered "not only as a process influenced by the player, but also as the process through which the player's situatedness is shaped." (52-53) In other words, how the avatar is constituted by the game world situates the player. This emphasizes the intersection of player agency in the game world with the affordances the game world which hosts the avatar, drawing attention to the binding of the avatar to game world design. To put it another way, the player has agency over their avatar, but is still constrained by the game design in how the avatar might exist within the game world. This is important to my arguments as it reinforces the idea that despite some player freedom in control and design of their avatar, the avatar is still bound by the design of the game and because the avatar is the vehicle by which the player experiences the game world, these experiences are also bound by the design choices I am criticizing in this writing.

Kania continues to highlight the importance of game design in player's experience of and participation in a game world by drawing attention the concept of the "ludic subjectivity" which she states can be used to define the

"relation between avatar and player within the gameworld" (55-56). She cites a definition of ludic subjectivity by Daniel Vella who articulates it as:

> …an entity that belongs to the gameworld, and is thus in a position to perceive the gameworld from an internal perspective, while the implied player is the standpoint the game establishes for the player as an individual outside the gameworld, engaging with the game as an artefact (24).

Following this articulation of the ludic subject, Kania expresses that it is "essentially" the mode by which the player experiences the game world as themselves (or as "I"), "while engaging with the gameworld" (55-56). In other words, the avatar is, similarly to Boellstorf's claim, the modality by which players experience "virtual selfhood" within the game world while existing outside the world. It is worth noting that following this Kania notes the ability of the player to "set their own goals within the gameworld to some degree, varying from game to game" which further supports the design of the game as limiting the potential for these experiences of self within the game world (55-56).

It seems clear that Kania puts significant weight in the idea that a player identifies themselves as existing within the gameworld through ludic subjectivity as experienced through self-avatar, and this is further supported by her arguments regarding the self as realized in a game world which reference Satre's position on the nature of the self. On this she writes "According to Sartre, an

individual is nothingness. They emerge as being amongst other beings and are always tied to the world they are thrown into." (61). This claim is supported by Satre's *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology* as follows:

> Our being is immediately 'in situation'; that is, it arises in enterprises and knows itself first in so far as it is reflected in those enterprises. We discover ourselves then in a world peopled with demands, in the heart of projects 'in the course of realization' (J.P. Sartre 1978, 39)

Kania further supports the idea of the self as experienced through the gameworld (and its limitations via game design) writing that "the avatar [is] experienced as self, and its position within the gameworld." and stating that the experience of the avatar is something that the player may "internalize" (63-65). She states that "As long as I perceive the unfolding gameplay as my own adventure, my gaze is merged with the gaze and agency of my avatar; I can act as the avatar and think of myself as the avatar. The gameplay situation remains a personal experience…" (106). Here, Kania's description of the experiences of the player within the game world through the avatar as personal experience appears to indicate her belief that these in game experiences translate to experiences which impact the player who exists outside the game world. Additionally, her belief that the game-world and its design are important in forming these experiences is clearly illustrated in her statement that "The adventure is experienced by the self-avatar, whose situatedness and existential project is

encountered as already established within the gameworld… she is choosing from the designed set of possibilities. (123).

The Potential of Avatars:

Regarding identity formation in virtual worlds, T.L. Taylor argues, in *The Social Life of Avatars: Presence and Interaction in Shared Virtual Environments* that avatars allow participants in virtual worlds to "…fully inhabit the world" and "construct their identities through avatars" (40). Furthermore, Taylor writes in *Ethnography of Virtual Worlds*; "Avatars and textual bodies facilitate interaction, shape and solidify identity, as well as more generally mediate user's engagement with the world." (4). Additional argument towards the potential for the constitution and performance of social identity in contemporary digital existence is also provided by author Sherry Turkle, in Alone Together, who argues "identity work" occurs whenever one creates an avatar in a virtual world and claims that digital embodiment allowing users to "compose and project" an identity (180). Also, worth considering is Boellstorff's suggestion that some residents in *Second Life* consider their virtual self a more authentic representation of themselves than their real-life corporeal body (122). It seems that the given the right conditions in virtual worlds and shared fantasies, realities detached from reality, may afford individuals opportunities to actualize elements of themselves they are unable to in the real world.

Additionally, Boellstorff quotes "residents" of *Second Life* as reporting they could be their "true self" in the virtual world, with evidence that "*Second Life* provided an opportunity to reflect upon and transform their actual-world gender" (119, 142). This premise of gender-switching in virtual worlds appears to be a common practice, with Bonnie Nardi writing, in *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, regarding "the practice of male players playing female characters", in reference to a 2005 survey of players which found, "23 percent of real life males' characters were female" (158). These points are especially important to my arguments regarding the significance of avatar gender representation. It is great to know that some individuals find avatars useful in understanding their own gender identity, however I would propose that it is just as important to provide options for those who identify as being outside of the traditional gender binary. Hints of playful gender expressions do appear to arise in virtual worlds, with many such examples being illustrated in academic accounts of gender bending through virtual avatars. For example, in "Virtually Queer: Subjectivity Across Gender Boundaries in *Second Life"*, author Joseph Clark writes about his own performance of gender, and the possibilities for gender bending afforded in the virtual world of *Second Life.* Regarding this he writes:

> It's this very fluidity of apparent gender [in *Second Life*] … that I believe makes Queer Theory a good lens through which to examine genderbending in these virtual environments. Queer Theory, which might be called an "anti-perspective," asserts that gender and indeed all

> identity is performative. Not “a performance” in the theatrical sense, but a bringing-to-form, a constitution, a creation that emerges from culture and ideology as well as material conditions. (7)

This is an excellent account of how gender is considered performative under the lens of Queer Theory, and how material conditions, in our case the design of virtual worlds, can play a role in its constitution. In this instance, the material circumstances being considered by Clark are the virtual world which houses the avatar body of the player. Clark suggests the malleable and customizable nature of virtual worlds such as *Second Life* as being excellent staging grounds for exploration of gender performance, even though the majority are designed with avatar selection which adheres to traditional gender binaries. Specifically, he writes that “While most games and online environments only provide binary gender selections, these can be worked around through presentation”, while suggesting that “*Second Life* is the ultimate 'rip, mix and burn' of reality which allows for the construction of postmodern, blended spaces and bodies” which he argues results in “a kind of polygendered omnisexuality” (7).

The importance of options for representation in avatars is emphasized by the extent to which individuals often identify with their avatars and in game characters. For example, Gary Alan Fine writes, in *Shared Fantasy: Roleplaying Games as Social Worlds,* about the connection between a player and their characters, specifically; “the strong identification also is revealed when the character, although not killed, is permanently disfigured, as if this disfigurement

were a stain upon the identification that players have with their characters. This emotion draws heavily from the shame and identity loss that individuals feel when their own bodies are disfigured." (220).

Sherry Turkle also speaks to the potential for self-constitution in virtual spaces in *Multiple Subjectivity and Virtual Community at the End of the Freudian Century* while discussing player's participation in virtual Multi-User Domains (MUDS). In this article she writes, "'This is more real than my real life,' says a character who turns out to be a man playing a woman who is pretending to be a man. As players participate in MUDS, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing selves through social interaction." It is worth noting that Turkle here highlights social interaction in these space as an important factor in constructing the self, much like Boellstorf, which reinforces the importance of shared experience over a requirement that a virtual world be digital in nature (these MUD worlds she is referencing are largely text based). It is also, for our purposes, worth considering that the individual she quotes in the first part is utilizing this virtual space to practice a sort of gender bending or drag performance. This helps to, once again, illustrate that individuals often use their participation in virtual social spaces to explore aspects of the self in relation to gender, and to experience instances of drag or gender bending. This idea is also demonstrated by Turkle's account of another player:

> Case, a thirty-four-year-old industrial designer, reports that he likes participating in online virtual communities (MUDding) as a female

> because (some would think paradoxically) it makes it easier for him to be aggressive and confrontational. Case's several online female personae – strong, dynamic, 'out there' women – remind him of his mother, whom he describes as a strong, 'Katherine Hepburn type.' His father was a mild-mannered man, a 'Jimmy Stuart type.' Case says that in 'real life' he has always been more like his father, but he came to feel like he paid a price for his low-key ways. When he discovered MUDS, he saw a possibility to experiment… Case's gender swapping has given him permission to be more assertive within the MUD and more assertive outside of it as well…

This account of Case's experimentation in virtual worlds is suggested as allowing him to not only practice aspects of the self he would be hesitant to in the "real world", but also that this practice has had an impact on their personae and character outside of the game. Turkle writes of this as well, stating "Case's gender swapping has enabled the different aspects of his inner world to achieve expression without compromising the values he associates with his 'whole person'".

Play as a Site of Resistance:

I have discussed views that play, and game worlds are distinct from the everyday, but also how they seem to be entangled with the everyday world. Miguel Sicart, however, pushes back on the idea that play occurs as separate

from the everyday, and stresses that play is indeed interwoven with our everyday world and its institutions. Specifically, in *Play Matters* Miguel Sicart suggests play as existing in, rather than opposed to institutions and everyday life, stating "to play is to be present in the world", and maintains that play is the way by which we "explore who we are and what we can say", with suggestion to reclaim play as a "way of expression" (1-3, 5). This could be understood in relation to Butler's account "drag" as performative identity in relation to the public body, especially with Sicart writing; "Play appropriates events, structures, and institutions to mock them and trivialize them…" (3). The following quote from Butler is helpful in seeing parallels here, as they bring the term "play" into their discussion in relation to drag and performance of gender(ed) identity in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination":

> *When and where does my being a lesbian come into play?... To say that I 'play' at being one is not to say that I am not one really, rather, how and where I play at being one is the way in which that 'being' gets established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed… paradoxically, it is precisely the repetition of play that establishes as well the instability of the very category it constitutes.* (311)

In the above quote, Butler states that it is the repetition of play which confronts homophobic and heteronormative ideals works to bring about instability, or we might say disruption, to these ideals. For a possible example of this one might consider a drag show, where individuals who would be defined in a

heteronormative ideology as male or female play at representing themselves as another gender through their performance in the space of the show. In this instance the show becomes the game world, or playground, and though it is a space some might consider to be distinct or separate from the everyday, it is without doubt that it occurs within the real world, and that the play in this space has potential to disrupt heteronormative institutions. This aligns with Sicart's view that play is a form of "production" in the sense that it has potential to produce narratives and instances of being which disrupt established norms and hierarchies (5).

It is also worth noting Sicart states that "Play… can be designed" and notes a "materiality of the game" which frames the "Context… in which we play", lending support to arguments that the design of game spaces/worlds could either evoke, or limit, opportunities for expressive play (7). In line with this example of a drag performance Sicart comments on "masks and disguises" as vehicles of play and in line with my arguments regarding play as something which is affected by the architecture of the game world, he notes that play "can be designed" (7). The quality of play that they claim as lending itself to play's productive characteristics is its capacity for appropriation of a space; Specifically, they state that play "takes over the context in which play takes place" and that it "breaks the state of affairs" (14). We can see a parallel here to Butler's comment that play contributes to "the instability of the very category it constitutes". To Sicart, playfulness itself is an act of appropriation and of disruption, "To be

playful is to appropriate a context" it is a way of "taking over a situation" and works in a way which "transforms a context by means of the attitude projected to it" (27).

Another quality of play that Sicart deems essential for appropriation and disruption is ambiguity, which is critical to note for my investigation and critique of game worlds. He writes that "Playfulness reambiguates the world", and though this is possible, we must also recall Kania's claim play is often constrained by the design of worlds which limits to some extent how a player can render themselves in the game world. In this way, the power of play to be meaningfully disruptive and appropriative is affected by the integration of playful potential into a game world. There are of course ways around design which players could employ to appropriate game worlds which are rigid. One example of this might be an individual hacking the data of a digital game world to create a custom avatar representing themselves in a way which would not be possible in the normal coding of a game world. This being said, it would often be the case in social digital games that such actions would not be allowed by moderators and administrators of the space, in the sense that they would be worked against, and instances of such appropriations of the space might lead to the player being banned or suspended from the game world.

Of course, hacking is not the only way to circumvent, or disrupt the design of a game world. Bernard Suits writes in the fourth chapter in his book, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, which is titled "Triflers, Cheats and

Spoilsports", regarding the ways one might interact with a game world and design in ways that the designers had not intended. Hackers would almost certainly fall under that category of cheats in this regard, as one who "breaks the rules" in order to achieve the objectives outlined within the institution of the game (50). The idea of trifling is worth noting here, as a trifler is one who "confirms to the rules of the game" but though their conduct is within the bounds of the game design (49). The trifler operates within the game world towards their own personal objective, as Suits puts it, they are trifling by "playing another game" within and at the expense of the game itself (49). I mention this, in part, because it brings to mind Clarks' account of player gender bending and gender performance which take place in *Second Life*, as this appears to reflect the concept of players working within the game design to fulfill a playful objective which is personal, and not an established objective within the game world. In other words, the typical objective of *Second Life* might be understood as accumulation of in game resources, while a trifler might ignore this and use the platform as a way to play at gender bending and playfully experiment with gender identity.

These examples of trifling and gender bending within games demonstrates a desire among players to experiment with, perform and express gender identity in a playful and ambiguous ways, however it is the case that many contemporary game worlds fail to live up to their potential as play spaces which allow for meaningful expression of self and disruption of institutional

norms and traditional gender bias. This is in fact a key argument of my writing, the fact that the rigid design of many popular virtual game worlds works against ambiguity and limits the playful potential of their participants. For Sicart “to be playful is to add ambiguity to the world and play with that ambiguity” and play is having the potential to offer opportunities for “expressing who we are” and experiencing “freedom” of the self (28-29). In this way we might understand the ideal game world as not restricting the player unnecessarily and granting every opportunity possible for expression of self through the game space. In the following chapter I will examine a selection of contemporary game spaces in terms of their potential for ambiguity and expression in relation to gender identity, with a focus on *World of Warcraft’s* game design. My arguments will highlight the shortcomings of *World of Warcraft’s* character creation system in terms of allowing ambiguity and make the argument that rather than allowing for disruption and appropriation of normative ideals surrounding gender, these systems work to reiterate oppressive gender binary norms.

Chapter Three: How the Design of Modern MMORPGs Reiterates the Heteronormative Imperative

Gender and Character Creation in MMORPGs:

It seems the case that play in virtual game worlds can create a unique and potent opportunity for identity work. However, it cannot be ignored how the design of these spaces might limit such opportunities; Specifically, in their requirement that players assume and participate in a predetermined gender binary which reiterates of the illusory differences of sex. The phenomenon of certain game features and functions being determined by the gender the player selects are commonly referred to as "gender locking", and there are numerous examples of games in the MMORPG genre which do this. The free to play game *Black Desert Online* is a somewhat infamous example of gender locked content as the game goes so far as to lock playable character classes to certain genders. Do you want to play a male Dark Knight, or maybe a female Ninja? Well in *Black Desert Online* this is not an option. This is not the case with just a few classes either, every class in the game is gender locked, so if you want to play a warrior your characters must be male and if you want to play a mystic then your character must be female.

While *Black Desert Online* gives an overt demonstration of how gender selection can determine the how the game can be played, *World of Warcraft* makes for an interesting example to examine because differences in options

afforded to the genders are still there, but are less obvious, and possibly more insidious. I say this because the differences in options for *World of Warcraft* are woven into the options for character customization, and if one was not looking for them, they might not be noticed at all. Even though these may not present as significant gameplay elements they still work to reiterate sexist ideals and illusory differences of sex. Of course, gender locking playable classes is sexist, but it is obvious, and so can be called out readily; the differences in *World of Warcraft* are more subtle and so might be overlooked by many, along with the issues they pose. It could be said that the devil is often in the details, and it is details such as those present in *World of Warcraft's* character customization which I would prefer to draw attention to. *World of Warcraft* is also a good option for examination due to the substantial body of writing available on it, as well as its familiarity to gamers and status as a staple of the genre. This is in part why it will serve as the specific site for our consideration of limitation by design. Another excellent reason to proceed with *World of Warcraft* as our example is that because of this game's commercial success it was looked to as a model of how to design a successful MMORPG by the numerous games that followed in this genre, seeking to replicate its success and take a piece of the market share which *World of Warcraft* was able to capture with adoption being previously unheard of in the genre. Because of this it might be said that *World of Warcraft* is somewhat archetypal and thus a sound representation of what is common in the MMORPG genre.

Before we move on to our examination of *World of Warcraft* however it is worth mentioning a couple other popular role-playing game titles which each handle character gender in an interesting way. These are especially interesting to consider as they represent two extremes in the spectrum of player choice in games, with one of them claiming to offer an abundance of choice ad customization, and the other offering no choice in customization at all. The first of these games, *Cyberpunk 2077*, is a recent release which built quite a bit of hype surrounding the ability for players to "mix it up" in character creation. Specifically, "The character creator allows players to choose any body type and genital combination" (Borsari, 2020). Unfortunately, upon release the game faced numerous critiques on its execution of its character creation system in relation to trans and gender nonbinary individuals. Borsari notes in an article published to ScreenRant.com that "the character's pronouns are tied to the pitch of their voice, with no option for non-binary pronouns. These issues in the game, combined with a lack of trans story characters and past problematic statements from CDPR [CD Projekt Red, the game's developer], paint a troublingly transphobic picture of the game and the studio that made it." This basically means that though many aspects of a character function as separate levers to create a custom character which expresses characteristics that suggest a mixed gender presentation, they still require the player to select a gendered pronoun and furthermore have the character's voice gender locked based on the pronoun the player selects.

Furthermore *Cyberpunk 2077* appears to fail in other areas of customization as well with respect to nonbinary representation. The following excerpt from Matteo Lupetti's article titled *Cyberpunk 2077 doesn't adhere to the gender binary – it revels in it,* does an excellent job pointing out the issues with the character creation tools based on their experience:

> In CD Projekt's latest game they represent a traditionally feminine body with a tiny waist and a traditionally masculine and muscular body… Cyberpunk 2077 promised a trans-humanist future where people freely modify their own bodies, but not only that, they aggressively promoted the flexibility of its character editor – but by switching between the two possible body types, I discovered that everything is still very gendered there. For example, available haircuts for the "traditionally feminine body type" are different from the available haircuts for the "traditionally masculine body type,"...If I choose the feminine body type I have boobs and I can switch between three different sizes… and between three different sizes for my nipples, while the masculine body type has only two option for its nipples: yes or no. And if I "look like a woman" I can't have a beard… At the end of the day gender in Cyberpunk 2077 is still intended as a binary choice… gender and pronouns are tied to V's voice: the voice reveals my "real gender."

From Lupetti's account of their experience with character creation, it is clear that *Cyberpunk 2077* has a character creation system which serves to reinforce the

idea of traits being ascribed to a male/female gender binary. According to this account, certain options appear locked to certain body types which might be described as traditionally masculine or feminine, which seems to echo not only our previous consideration of the customization options in *Pokémon Go* but will also foreshadow our discussion of the limitations for character customization found in *World of Warcraft*. This is especially disappointing given the game developers promise that this game would deliver a "trans-humanist future where people freely modify their own bodies". It seems that even in the brave new world of *Cyberpunk 2077* gendered norms are still hardcoded into being.

It is worth noting before we continue that though *Cyberpunk 2077's* character creation has its flaws it has been argued that it does present options that are moderately progressive when compared to traditional character creation modules in video games. Kostopolus hints at these merits in their article titled "Neither/Nor: The Gender Politics of the Cyberpunk Character Creator" while also acknowledging the games "ideological shortcomings" and "rampant transphobia". Despite these issues they make note that in every other game they've played "gender selection implicitly brings with it an understanding that your character has a specific set of junk" in Cyberpunk 2077 the player is able to choose from "rolodex of penises, a vulva, and an explicit "no, thank you" option", which in their opinion allows for "the conscious choice to play as an agender character in a way no other game has before" (Kostopolus 2021). They conclude that although *Cyberpunk 2077* is not necessarily "progressive" it's

novel attempt at less limiting character creation mechanics will hopefully lead to the creation of “some truly punk futures” that move past “this gender binary nonsense” (Kostopolus).

We will now turn our attention to *Rust*, which as mentioned previously offers no choice to the player in terms of character customization. To put it simply, a player’s avatar in Rust is randomly generated, including the avatar’s physical morphology, race and gender. This design choice is articulated by Garry Newman, owner of the studio responsible for the game, in his article *Why my videogame chooses your character’s race and gender for you*, writing that for all players, “Gender and race are randomly selected and linked to a player’s account, permanently unchangeable.” (2016). This is unusual, as the tendency for online multiplayer games is towards avatars, or in game representations of players, which are highly customizable. So, in *Rust*, rather than giving player’s agency in how their avatar appears, the avatar they have in game is permanent and selected for them. The reason for this decision is given by Newman in this same article is based on “gameplay”, as he writes: “We don’t believe that letting you choose your race and gender would improve the game. On the other hand, randomizing everyone’s gender and race meets all our requirements. We get an even spread of races and genders that make players more identifiable.” (2016).

It is worth noting that the update to the game which randomized character gender occurred in 2016, following the update which randomized race (in 2015), with the original state of the game being one in which that avatar of

“everyone in the game was white (male) and looked more or less the same.” (Grayson). These updates are required to continue playing the game, not something that could be ignored by players. The player reaction to the mandatory changes is considered by Newman to be varied, as he comments some players “are happy to have the diversity” while admitting “Others aren’t so positive.” and citing their concern that “They feel that playing a gender or race that doesn’t match their own is detrimental to their enjoyment.” (2016). This is an interesting complaint, as it fails to consider the experience of the individuals who previously had no choice but to play a generic “white male” avatar even if they were neither “white” nor “male”. Newman also rationalizes this approach to gameplay by saying “I would love nothing more than if playing a black guy in a game made a white guy appreciate what it was like to be a persecuted minority" (Grayson 2015). It stands to reason that this statement could also apply to males forced to play female avatars gaining a deeper understanding of sexism, and while I appreciate this optimism, and its logical potential, this seems like wishful thinking to me. The avatar is, after all just a skin and so only plays a part of gender performance. I would contend that an individual identifying as male, and existing in *Rust* as a female would not necessarily have the experience of an individual who identifies as female playing the game. This seems more akin to a drag performance, wherein the individual adopts the appearance of another gender, which might differ from their own gender identity. Considering Butler’s work on the performance of gender, it is discourse which establishes gender, and

so this single signifier would not amount having the experience of being male or female.

This mechanic of character randomization is certainly an interesting approach to inclusion of diversity; however, I am not convinced that removing player choice is necessary conducive to creating an inclusive environment for players. Rather I would be inclined to say that it is a problematic approach which is in opposition to the sort of character creation system I am calling for in this writing. This is because Rust not only reinforces a traditional gender binary of male and female through it's gendered character models, but furthermore removes a player's option to choose their gender presentation and appearance. I would put forward that gender is a choice, and though it does transcend the flesh, one of the amazing things about games is that the option to customize your character gives game spaces an opportunity to express oneself through by deciding how their avatar appears in the world.

The Sexualization of Pandas, Puppies and Cow-People (Oh My!):

Our discourse regarding "homo cyber", or the virtual human, and the potential for identity production in shared virtual worlds, suggests that identity production is possible in *World of Warcraft*. This is supported by writer William Bainsbridge, who argues in *The Warcraft Civilization: Social Science in a Virtual World* for production of a "social self" which he describes as "the set of ideas individuals

have about themselves, which are derived from communication with other people… (and) our impression of how other people view us." (174). He builds on this by suggesting that "In the real world, humans try to manage the impression they give others, and in WoW (*World of Warcraft)* they can do so possibly even more powerfully by selecting particular kinds of characters to represent them." (174).

The apparent claim above for digital spaces as removed seems misleading however, given the manner that many games, including *World of Warcraft*, incorporate heteronormative and patriarchal ideologies in their design. In other words, virtual space appears to have potential but, by design omits, or at least limits, potential expressions of otherness, by insistence of heteronormative gender binary in character creation. To be clear on this, it is the case in *World of Warcraft*, that players must select between male or female as part of the character creation process.

Hilde Corneliussen speaks to this in the chapter "World of Warcraft as a Playground for Feminism." from *Digital Culture, Play, and Identity: A World of Warcraft Reader*, writing that "Even though the fantasy universe constructed in *World of Warcraft* offers creatures that we do not expect to meet in our offline reality, it does not offer genders outside the most common way of structuring the world, into a dichotomy of males and females." (68) This raises concerns regarding the apparent reiteration of heteronormativity present in the design of *World of Warcraft*. In other words, under a reading of Butler, it might be

understood that avatar embodiment in *World of Warcraft* reinforces the "norms" of sex and gender, contributing to the "consolidation of the heterosexual imperative" as the player's interaction with their digital avatar works to materialize and reiterate traditional gender binaries (Butler 2). To elaborate on this, I will refer to Butlers writing in *Bodies That Matter* which states that:

> The regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the serve of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative… materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as powers most productive effect… "Sex" is… not simply what one has, or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility. (p2)

In other words, it is interesting to consider the process by which players must select a gender before their character can materialize in the game, in parallel to Butler's account of medical interpellation, whereby the intelligible subject is preceded by declaration of gender. To be clear, my argument here isn't that people select the gender they are assigned at birth (though they do often select their gender later in life), nor is it to say that a player's gender is the same as a player character's gender. I simply think it is worth noting that in both cases (in

the game world and in the everyday life) selection of gender is most often rendered as a requirement for viability and intelligibility of the subject.

Finally, it should be mentioned that Nardi does acknowledge, in her chapter titled "Gender," that "From the moment one creates a character and must choose its gender, gender is always present, in varying ways, in World of Warcraft." (152). She goes on to confirm the presence, in the game world, of patriarchal hegemony in writing that within *World of Warcraft*, "the social space was maintained as one in which males set the rhetorical tone. Sexualized, homophobic language was normalized in text and voice chat" (153). This is especially relevant given Butler's claim regarding the heterosexual imperative's role in materializing sexual difference and norms as an effect which institutes power hierarchy by production of bodies and identities which are categorized and recognized as either viable, or conversely, outside the domain of cultural intelligibility. In the following section I will demonstrate some of the ways gender stereotypes manifest in *World of Warcraft's* options for avatar creation. Nardi expands on her commentary regarding gender in *World of Warcraft* in relation to males who choose to play female characters. She suggests that this is not "males finding their inner female" but rather a factor in the "retrenching" of "the boys' treehouse", which leverages "the design of certain female characters… to reproduce a standard gender dynamic, the male gaze…" (159) Nardi writes "When we interviewed males about why they chose female characters, they said

two things. ‘Why not?’ and ‘If I have to look at a someone’s ass for three hours, it’s going to be a girl’s.’”

As part of my research, I spent some time with World of Warcraft’s character generation to see how gender manifests in its design. I have played the game before, logging several hours with friends when it first came out over 15 years ago, and revisiting it very briefly a few years back, mostly out of nostalgia. I can confirm that Nardi’s claims regarding sexist and male dominated tones in public channels based on my limited experience, however this is not the focus of my writing, but rather my observations in the design of the character creation system which I examined with this research project in mind. As such, the first thing I did once the game had downloaded was to take a deep dive into the character creation screen. As with most games character creation acts as a gateway to the world, with this being necessary to manifest a playable avatar in the world; and as with most games a gender binary option is present. Sitting right at the top of the screen the option between male and female genders is featured and as one might expect, it defaults to male. It is worth noting that though gamers are often assumed to be male, this is not overwhelmingly the case. In fact, statistically it can be seen that over the past 15 years the trend is moving towards more parity in gamer gender, with the male-female ratio recorded as 62% to 38% in 2006 and as 55% to 45% in 2021 (Clement)

Figure 4 - World of Warcraft Gender Selection

In *World of Warcraft's* character creation, the differences are quite apparent in both avatar design between genders, as well as the customization options available to genders of the different playable races. There are several examples which illustrate this divide and so I will spend some time going through them before we proceed. First, let's look at the difference in body types and features ascribed to the different genders. As one might expect, humans (and undead which are theoretically just deceased humans) have distinct body types depending on the gender selected. Most notably the males have broader shoulders and square jaws, with the females having smaller frames and breasts. Also, it is worth noting that though the garments are quite similar, the females have a lower neckline.

Figure 5 - Human (left) and Undead (right) male and female avatars.

What is somewhat more surprising is the sexualization of non human characters in this game; Specifically characters such as Tauren (which are basically humanoid cows), Draenei (which might be described as Reformed Demonic Aliens), Worgens (Reverse werewolves as far as I can tell), and The Pandarens (Humanoid Panda's who love to drink and party). As can be seen in the images below, these fantastical creatures are also restricted to the tropes of traditionally gendered physiques and attire.

Figure 6 - Tauren (left) & Draenei (right), male and female avatars.

Figure 7 - Worgen (left) & Pandaren (right), male and female avatars.

This gendering of fantasy races which, though humanoid, are distinctly non-human creatures serves to reinforce the naturalization of gender binary tropes and preconceptions of the idealized male and female. It is well known that human gender norms and culture are not pervasive to, nor applicable to other species in real life, so it seems truly strange that our culture's heteronormative ideas would be exported to these fantastical and clearly non-human species. If anything, this practice appears to exemplify just how actively these normative ideas regarding gender are reiterated in our societies cultural works and creative endeavors. It is also worth noting that though there are a number of customization options, there is a lack of options which would allow for the player to alter the default character models shape and size. This means that there is no way for the player to adjust the gendered form of their character

to something more gender neutral; These gendered figures must be taken as they are given, and accepted as a given within this world.

This sexualization of the avatar's figure and attire extends to all of the playable races in *World of Warcraft*; however, I believe this point has been demostrated, so we can skip a review of images of sexualized gnomes and goblins, and instead we will move on to a review of the way gender affects your options for character customization in Word of Warcraft.

The first instance of this I noticed was while tinkering with customization options for the blood elf character model. The case with this playable race appears to be similar to our example for player avatars in *Pokémon Go* which we discussed in the preface; That is to say, there are more options for customization available to the female blood elf avatar in *World of Warcraft*. This manifests as two additional categories which are absent in customization of the male blood elf avatar. These categories appear unnamed, but the icons and options associated with them appear to represent "jewelry" and "body" customization. As can be seen below, the male blood elf avatar has no options for jewelry or adornment. The female blood elf avatar on the other hand has options in the jewelry category for both earrings and a necklace.

Figure 8 - Jewelry is available for the female blood elf, but not for the male blood elf.

The option to adorn the the female avatar here is extended in the category for body customization, which, as can be seen in the next image, gives options for armbands and bracelets, as well as jewelry colour. It is also probably worth noting that selecting the customization options for the body of the female blood elf avatar removes most of their clothing and renders them in their undergarments. This feature of rendering the avatar in their underclothes does not appear to be gendered in and of itself since options to customize the body of other races include male avatars who are also rendered in their underwear. That said the style and cut of these underclothes certainly appears to have been designed with intent to sexualize the female blood elf avatar, given the provocative/minimalist style of the garment, and it's exposure of the avatars flesh.

Figure 9 - An additional category of "body" customization available for the female blood elf which renders them in underwear.

This difference in undergarment style is readily apparent between the genders of avatars in some races. The best example of this would be with the Draenei, which, as can be seen in the following images have male avatars rendered in boxer short style undergarments, while the female avatars are rendered in a fashion similar to the blood elf female, but with a strapless brassiere.

Figure 10 - Male (left) & female (right) Draenei avatars rendered in their undergarments in the game options for avatar customization.

Returning to my point regarding the different customization options afforded to each gender of the playable races further exploration revealed that the both the human and worgen races possess a difference in customization options between genders which mirrors that of blood elves. In *World of* Warcraft, both humans and worgens give options for necklaces, to the female avatars, but afford no such option to the male avatars. There are additional differences in options features for both races as well. In the case of humans and worgens, both genders have a jewelry style icon, but while the male avatar has options for eyebrows and eye colour, the female avatar has customization options for makeup, piercings, and the necklace. It is clear there is a difference here, which is informed by the gender of avatar the player has selected for their character. It is also clear that this difference in customization options is contrived

based on stereotypical ideas regarding the feminine and the masculine. The idea that makeup, or jewelry should be limited to one gender, or the other is a social construct and not based in any actual physical limitation. Anyone who has been to a punk rock show, or is familiar with the scene, should be aware that any gender can readily don piercings, jewelry, and makeup. So, it is clearly a limitation that has been designed into the game, and one included based on the designer's conception of what is masculine and feminine.

I could go on to list all the differences in customization, and their basis in sexism and preconstructed notions of gender for the night elves, pandaren, troll, and tauren races as well, but I think the point has been sufficiently demonstrated already and I will not belabor it further. It should be clear based on our discussion so far that the customization options in *World of Warcraft* are limited by design in a way that is sexist and reinforces problematic gender stereotypes. As people increasingly spend their time in virtual spaces, the importance of designing spaces which work to disrupt heteronormative ideas cannot be understated. For this reason, the next two chapters will be dedicated to consideration of how the ambiguous design of *Amtgard* allows for more nuanced and meaning expression and exploration of gender identity through its' omission of gender selection in character creation.

Chapter 4: Ambiguous Design in Amtgard & Playful Potential

About *Amtgard*:

I've spoken at length regarding how some games limit the player through their design and have also alluded to the ambiguity of the live action role-playing game *Amtgard* and how its design grants participants the freedom to craft a character without unnecessary restrictions. Now it is time to discuss what *Amtgard* is and look at how it accomplishes this. I will begin with a brief overview of *Amtgard's* game world and follow this with an account of its character creation process and how it allows for a more meaningful constitution of the player's character in the game world. In the following chapter we will examine accounts from actual *Amtgard* players for insight into how they feel about the character creation system and the potential it holds for players.

Narrative in *Amtgard*:

A basic understanding of the world of *Amtgard* is an asset at this point in our discussion. *Amtgard* is a collection of Live Action Role-player organized into local chapters (more often called parks) by physical geography who participate in a shared fantasy world. Geographic regions with significant numbers of players are classified as kingdoms and principalities. There are currently 22 Kingdoms in *Amtgard* which cover large geographic regions, and a single principality, which is

a large collection of players within a kingdom which are granted special status and privileges by their patron kingdom. Local groups are organized by player population, and deemed a “shire”, “barony” or “duchy” based on the number of players. These local groups are organized within a larger kingdom (and/or principality) and hold political power based on their size. To give an example; Peterborough, Ontario, is known in *Amtgard* as “The Duchy of Linnagond” and is considered part of the “The Kingdom of the Nine Blades” which covers most of the geographical region of Canada. Canada itself has several parks spread throughout Ontario and Quebec, British Columbia, Alberta and Manitoba.

Figure 11 - Heraldry of The Kingdom of The Nine Blades *Figure 12 - Heraldry of The Duchy of Linnagond*

For an idea how deep the rabbit hole goes, regions and individual parks sometimes go to war with each other seeking glory or independence. For example, The Duchy of Linnagond was recently at war with The Duchy of Felfrost (also known as Ottawa) and the Canadian parks were recently pushing for

separation from its patron kingdom for over a decade. Previously the region held standing as “The Principality of The Northern Empire” and was under rule of “The Kingdom of The Rising Winds”. However, in 2020 the Canadian players were successful in this political undertaking (termed a Kingdom Bid) and are now formally recognized as “The Kingdom of The Nine Blades”.

In addition to the sort of political movements described above, grand narratives concerning epic regional struggles against shared enemies are often woven and implemented by the society’s lore masters. This often takes the form of traditional fantasy narratives such as invasions of orcs, evil spirits, or demon lords. The most recent one I personally participated in had to do with an army of the undead and featured unique instances where participating players had to struggle with their own skeletons attempting to leave their bodies to join the ranks of the undead. It is also worth noting that players are free to choose sides when these events occur. In one such event which considered spirits as the antagonist, many of the residents of Linnagond looked for ways to work with the spirits in question due to the Duchy’s history of living in peace with spirits and cooperating with them. Local chapters also celebrate a yearly coronation and seasonal festivals, often entertaining visiting players from other parks with quests, games, and feasts. Players can receive awards and recognition for various feats and accomplishments in several categories including crafting, arts, combat, and community. It is also possible for players to attain noble titles, knighthoods, form battle companies and start their own noble lineage.

For an idea of scope, *Amtgard* has active groups across North America with the map below showing the distribution of parks across Canada and the United States.

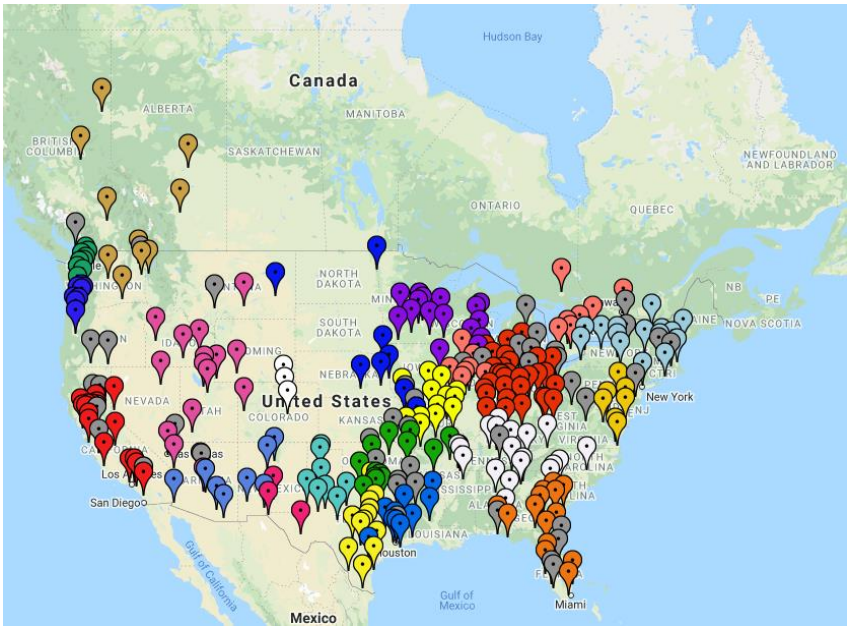

Figure 13 - Amtgard Atlas (Source: ork.Amtgard.com)

There doesn't appear to be any official documentation regarding the number of players active in *Amtgard*; There is however some indication of the number of players involved. The "ORK", which acts as *Amtgard's* player database, has recorded over 3000 player sign ins in the past year (this number is likely much lower than would be normal, considering the pandemic lockdowns) and the official Facebook page has over 7000 people following it at the time of writing, so the number of players is likely in the thousands.

Gameplay in Amtgard:

Live Action Role-playing games (LARP for short) are role-playing games where the player acts out their character in person. In other words, they transform their own bodies into the character through garb, gear, and typically a bit of acting. There is still an understanding that the character is separate from the player (insofar as they are a character), however the character is tied to the physical body of the player. It can be considered similarly to an actor portraying a role: The character being played by the actor is understood as a separate being by the audience represented by the actor who portrays their character through costume and performance in an imagined world. Whatever the actor does or says, is understood, in the context of the performance, as being said or done by the character. Likewise, in *Amtgard* if a player wants their character to speak, swing a weapon, run away or cast a spell, they do so by performing that action, rather than moving a piece on a game board, pressing a button on a controller, or clicking a mouse. This also differs from tabletop role playing games where an action is undertaken by the player stating the actions of their character and rolling dice to see if this was successful. In LARP, if you want to hit something with your sword you must physically swing a mock sword and make contact with the enemy.

Something that stands out about *Amtgard* is that it tends towards the "Live Action" part of "Live Action Role Playing". Though feasts, quests, and role-play dialogue are an important part of gameplay, physical contests of skill

termed “battle games” occupy a significant portion of most players’ game time. It is also worth noting here that in terms of role-playing and over-arching narrative, player characters, termed heroes, are distinct from other in-game entities in that they are always revived upon death. This is, in narrative terms, due to the existence of a phoenix deity which grants all heroes immortality. Because of this there are only two ways for a player’s character to die in the game: Either by decision of the player (which is most common of the two and often used for dramatic narrative purposes), or by being forgotten (for example if a player stops participating in *Amtgard*).

Players usually meet 2-3 times per week. One of these may be a social or crafting themed night, but the other meetup or two are typically field days. For a field day, players show up at a local park or field and engage in the previously mentioned “battle games”. These are combat based and objective oriented, for example, team death match or capture the flag. Players organize into teams and use foam weapons (called boffers), and class abilities (which take the form of verbal incantations, and sometimes padded spell balls) to defeat the other team. An interesting note here is the role play element is not essential for this sort of play. In other words, one could play the game using the battle mechanics without any comprehension of, or immersion in the game world. Despite this, immersion, and role-play, while not essential to battle games are most often incorporated in some form.

Chances are a new player, who wanders onto the field showing interest, rather than given a lecture on the game world and its nuance, will be given a foam sword, taught basic combat mechanics, and invited to join the next battle game. Of course, many player classes (roles in the game), require additional knowledge, but a peasant only needs to know hit mechanics, and so can learn about the world gradually while playing. This could raise the question though, how the game mechanics maintain that feeling of a fantasy narrative when gameplay is a group of people running around a park with foam weapons. The next section will examine the gameplay mechanics of *Amtgard* and attempt to answer this question.

Amtgard Game Mechanics:

The number of fascinating mechanics featured in *Amtgard* are numerous, but for our discussion we will focus in on spell casting and garb requirements. First, let us consider the healing spell. To cast heal another player must recite the following:

> Sword Cut, spear stab, mace smash, arrow jab.
>
> Let the white light of healing descend on thee.
>
> Let the white light of healing stop thy spilling blood.
>
> Let the white light of healing mend thy bones.
>
> Let the white light of healing close thy wounds.

> Let the white light of healing restore thy vigor.
>
> The white light of healing hath healed thee. (*Amtgard* Rules of Play Version 9, 2021).

Consider this as opposed to another possible scenario of the player being required to say "healing" twenty times, or something of that sort. It is reasonable to assume that this mechanic of requiring players to recite a spell contributes to the immersion in *Amtgard*'s fantasy narrative. Furthermore, to be successfully cast the "incantation" must be audible within 20 feet, pronounced properly and uninterrupted (from *Amtgard* Rules of Play Version 9, 2021).

Imagine the impact this sort of design choice might have on a player's internal narrative while playing the game. Even better, let us imagine together.

> *Emma moves warily, eyeing the battlefield, staying close to her allies as they move towards the enemy. Suddenly an enemy assassin flanks them and their blade snakes out to take a leg from their warrior. With an ally pursuing the fleeing assassin to drive them away, Emma kneels beside the injured warrior, drops her weapon and laying her free hand on their shoulder begins chanting…*
>
> *"Sword cut, spear stab, mace smash, arrow jab…" her attention wavers slightly as the enemy advances on them but after pausing she continues...*

"…let the white light of healing descend on thee. Let the white light of healing stop thy spilling blood…" Two enemies advance, the warrior feints and fences as Emma raises his shield to intercept a spear thrust.

"…Let the white light of healing close they wounds…" an enemy blade sails towards Emma's un-protected flank. She inhales; the spell caught in her lungs as she waits for the hit…but she is saved by the allied warrior's parry at the last possible instant. Their other ally returns and flanks the enemy, forcing them to regroup.

Emma takes a deep breath and begins her spell again…

Another point that relates to our discussion regarding gender being excluded from game design is a relatively recent development which involves a series of revisions to the wording of abilities and battle games to remove gendered elements from *Amtgard*'s game design. Two notable examples of this are the game titled "Two Man Forever" being renamed "Two Hero Forever", and the incantation "Avenge me my brothers" being revised as "Avenge me my comrades". This doesn't relate directly to our topic of character creation, but it does demonstrate how game design can be mindful and inclusive in terms of gendered language and gameplay mechanics.

Garb requirements are also worth noting briefly. These mechanics are open to interpretation and a player's own judgment, but basically read that after about a month of playing, a player should look somewhat like what they are

playing. That is, a wizard must look arguably like a wizard; a monk like a monk might look and so on. This is not meant to be exclusionary, and exceptions are often made, however there are special incentives for "looking the part" in the form of perks for the class being played. When we consider the challenge Live Action Role Playing must overcome in reconciling the mundane and the fantastic these examples of garb requirements and spellcasting mechanics should help to illustrate how narrative resonance is built into game mechanics to encourage player immersion in the game world.

Character Creation in Amtgard:

In previous chapters I've discussed the merits of ambiguity in game worlds and criticized the limitations in character creation found in many contemporary role-playing games. My critique has been directed in large part at requirements to select a gender when creating a new character with lamentation that this requirement and the gendered design of avatars, often works to perpetuate problematic ideas related to heteronormativity, and even sexist ideology. So now we will take a moment to examine how *Amtgard* handles character creation through consideration of its guidelines for character creation. These guidelines can be observed in page one of the *Amtgard* Rules of play under the section titled "Getting Started". The guidance given regarding character creation in *Amtgard* can be summarized as follows:

1. Read the rules to get an idea of *Amtgard*'s culture and gameplay.
2. Pick a character name.
3. Consider creating a character back story.
4. Acquire or make some gear (weapons, equipment, and garb).
5. Find a park to join.

One might notice that these requirements are simple and with regards to actual creation of your character can be boiled down to two requirements and one suggestion. Specifically, pick a name, garb/gear your character and, optionally, determine a backstory for your character. It is clear to see that there is no suggestions or requirements regarding character gender identity, restrictions for selection of a name, or limitations to the sort of garb one might choose. Regarding garb it is recommended that garb makes some sort of sense in relation to your character and the world, but this is open to the interpretation and rationale of the player. Most importantly for our considerations though, is that there is no requirement to play as male, female, or any gender identity. This allows the player to create a character that they want to play without insisting on conformity to normative or, in fact, any sort of ideology regarding gender. We should note to that this doesn't disallow a player from playing as female, or male, and at the same time doesn't infer that these genders should be selected or played in any particular way.

For an example of the character creation process I will take a moment to discuss my own experience in character creation from when I joined *Amtgard*

several years ago how it led me to a better understanding of my everyday self. I was walking with a friend, and we saw some folks running around a local park, yelling incantations, and swinging foam swords. When we stopped to watch we were invited to join and so we did. This was my first experience of *Amtgard*, and I was hooked. For the next couple weeks, I would attend without a character, until it was suggested that I create one to be able to engage in the story and role-play. I decided I wanted to be a cat… specifically a very magical cat who would typically occupy the humanoid form of a "cat-person". I selected the name Chozo (The home planet of Samus Aran from the Metroid video game series, which is ironically home to a species of bird-like aliens), purchased cat ears, and had a friend help me create some flowing neutral-toned garb. The garb selection was to suit my decision to play as a monk, and for ease of movement.

During the process of creating my character, gender never even occurred to me. When I considered it later after years of playing as this character, I concluded that since Chozo was a cat, they probably didn't have a sense of gender culture, or gender norms, and realized that when playing as Chozo I conducted myself in a way that was, in my opinion, very gender neutral. This led me to consider that my character didn't identify as male or female, and they were existing in a way that resisted these boundaries through their conduct and mannerisms. It was around this time that I realized was a very comfortable way to exist for me outside of the game as well, and it is my opinion that my time

playing as Chozo, the magical cat-monk, was a significant factor in my considerations regarding my own gender identity outside of the game world.

There were other practices I observed in *Amtgard* which fueled my interest in it as a site which merited further consideration for it's potential to resist heteronormative aside from the development of my own character. I've already mentioned a couple changes to made to incantations and game titles, and it might be worth mentioning here some of the other practices I noticed which demonstrate the inclusive nature of *Amtgard.* Several players I've seen don rainbow badges which are intended to denote their approachability as safe persons for individuals with concerns regarding inclusivity, or who feel they need someone to talk to about issues in the game or outside of it. These individuals can be found at every event I've personally attended and often have designated safe spaces established at these events, having tents or shelters with rainbow decorations which illustrate their purpose. I also recently had the pleasure of joining a queer fighting company, *The Rebel Roses,* which aims to celebrate "queer excellence in combat". For context, there are several team-based events and competitions in *Amtgard* and fighting companies are recognized groups which are formed to compete in these events, similar to how other games might have guilds or adventuring parties. These events could be capture the flag, traditional versus battles, or even Phoenix League: An *Amtgard* sport similar which might be described as fantasy combat touch football and which has its' own yearly tournament.

One additional thing that stands out to me is the players themselves and their approach to character creation and development, more specifically the variation and diversity of the characters people create. My favourite example of this is that since I started playing there has been a player at my home park who plays as a mushroom. More specifically, the play as a mushroom/fungus folk (what might be termed Mycinid in many fantasy games and settings). This really stuck with me throughout my considerations of *Amtgard* and its' character creation mechanics. I must admit, I never asked directly if their reason for playing such a character was at all related to a desire to express any particular gender identity, gender neutrality, or even the absence of gendered identity. Nonetheless, I found myself considering that the option to play such a character presented fascinating opportunities for expressions of this sort. If one were to imagine a cat-folk as being somewhat removed from politics of gender and gender identity, this could certainly apply to a character who is a mushroom folk as well. This is very speculative on my part, but as mentioned, the potential for playful expression this character choice represented has stayed with me. Practices like this fueled my motivation to conduct interviews with players regarding their opinions of and experiences with character creation in *Amtgard.*

Of course, this is just my experience with *Amtgard*, but I hope that sharing it will help the reader to understand the potential of ambiguity in game worlds. When players are not required to select between male and female genders to enter a game world, it allows them to craft characters that exist

outside of these binaries of gender and provides opportunity for disruption of stereotypes regarding gender identity, displacement of stigma towards non-binary persons, and possibly even the opportunity for personal discovery. As mentioned though, this has just been my experience, and so in the following chapter we will consider the stories and opinions of other *Amtgard* players regarding character creation and *Amtgard* and its potential for personal expression and exploration.

Chapter Five: Research Methodology, Player Interviews & Response Analysis

Research Objective:

I have demonstrated in previous chapters how the design of virtual game worlds can reinforce or challenge the heteronormative imperative. Chapter three delivered critique of the design of the popular Massive Multi-Player Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG) *World of Warcraft* and argues that its character creation system materializes gender at the site of the player's digital avatar, which in turn, works to reproduce oppressive gender norms. Chapter five compared the character creation system featured in *World of Warcraft* with the more flexible experience offered by the Live Action Role-Playing Game (LARP) *Amtgard* and highlights the relatively ambiguous design of *Amtgard's* character creation system. Evaluation of this difference illustrates *Amtgard's* potential to appropriate, trivialize, and resist the same heteronormative imperative which *World of Warcraft's* design works to reinforce. This chapter will feature experiences shared by *Amtgard* players which show this ambiguity in design system being utilized.

The participant research component of this project is intended to explore the possibility that the flexibility of *Amtgard's* character creation results in the creation of characters in the game world which would not be possible with the relatively traditional character creation system found in games such as *World of*

Warcraft. Specifically, it is the objective of this inquiry to investigate the possibility of players utilizing *Amtgard's* ambiguous character creation system to constitute characters which the player identifies as expressive and/or representative of gender(s) which: i) Exist outside of traditional gender binary (traditional being male and female gender roles with gender identities predetermined by anatomy). ii) Differ from the player's, or character's, gender assigned at birth. The objective of this study is both to find out if *Amtgard* players agree that *Amtgard's* character creation system allows for the creation of such characters, and to discover if this potential is utilized by players in creating these sorts of characters.

Researcher Positionality:

To begin, I would like to acknowledge my relation to hegemonic systems of power as one that is relatively compatible with normative ideology, resulting in an outsider relation with those who are systemically oppressed by these systems. To put this another way, I would like to acknowledge myself as an able-bodied Caucasian who, for the most part, has a social location which benefits from, rather than is oppressed by, hegemonic patriarchal-colonial-settler ideologies.

Given my positionality, it seems imperative to adopt what Fairn Herising refers to as "an attitude of epistemic uncertainty" which she notes in chapter

five of Brown and Strega's Research as Resistance, as necessary in utilizing "queer theory… to decentre the very position of the researcher, to renegotiate the elements that 'fix' the researchers in their identity categories…" (141). The intent here is to acknowledge how my lived experience might work, in part, to construct my understanding of the knowledge shared by participants in the research activity. In other words, understanding that my production of knowledge is constructed, at least partially, by my own lived experience in relation to systems of power and dominant ideologies/schemas of knowledge.

Regarding the imperative towards questioning and uncertainty of one's own positionality Adale Sholock states, in Methodology of the Privileged, that "although self-reflexivity does not put an end to one's ignorance, trying to maintain an active awareness of privilege and the ignorance it engenders should be considered the 'minimum requirement' for white Western feminists" (705). In considering this I would suggest that much of my self-reflexive work will be ongoing, with a degree of outsider ignorance necessarily assumed throughout my research. Towards this, the research methodology will attempt to embody a collaborative approach to knowledge production with participants, including open communication regarding the research process, and ongoing consideration of the effect my positionality as a researcher might have on the production of knowledge in this research.

Brown and Potts expand on this research imperative, stating that "Being an anti-oppressive researcher means that there is political purpose and action to

your research work", insofar as it includes "the political practices of creating knowledge" (255). They continue, whether the purpose be "on a broad societal level, or about personal growth" the defining characteristic is a commitment to social justice (255). Having initially been more to focused on success in knowledge production I had been caught off guard by this question, specifically; Why it should be produced? Giving this further consideration, I believe my motivation to be a desire to challenge societal norms and dominant perspectives viewed as natural; Both based on observation of these oppressive system's impact on other persons, as well as my own experience with these structures.

To summarize my understanding of the principles and practices mentioned above, I would suggest that that positionality is not determined, and is not a static position which I may articulate in a statement and move on. Rather it may be understood as an ongoing practice of evaluation, and reevaluation, regarding one's relation to oppressive hegemonic ideology and power structures. In this way, it can never be determined completely, as the researcher's positionality will shift in relation to their research, and their present relation to these dynamics. In other words, our positionality is always shifting, as our circumstances and perspectives shift, and so being in flux, must be assessed regularly, and with each research iteration.

Research Method & Considerations:

It is the objective of this inquiry to investigate the possibility of players utilizing *Amtgard's* ambiguous character creation system to constitute characters which the player identifies as expressive and/or representative of gender(s) which:

i) Exist outside of traditional gender binary (traditional being male and female gender roles with gender identities predetermined by anatomy).

ii) Differ from the player's, or character's, gender assigned at birth.

As mentioned previously, a significant design consideration is to ensure a collaborative approach which endeavors to co-produce knowledge with participants, rather than simply collect it from them and to avoid, as far as possible, any appropriation of the participants shared experience, knowledge and/or stories which might result from this research endeavor. It is therefore essential that the intended method and approach take steps to properly respect, and to not misrepresent any knowledge shared.

I had initially considered an anonymous survey to investigate player experiences broadly, while relying on anonymity to secure an ethical base for the research. However, I now believe my mindset was one of "data collection" and am concerned that this method, while producing a significant quantity of data, would prove qualitatively limiting in critical ways (Ackerly 161). I now seek to acknowledge this process as one of "data production" and also to acknowledge, that all data sets are produced in context of power relations and the subjective

"conceptual baggage" of the researcher, which necessarily influence the form and content of knowledge produced (Ackerly 161). As suggested by Kirby, Greaves, and Reid in *Experience Research Social Change: Methods Beyond the Mainstream*, I aim to consider "how we write and represent and how we co-produce the narratives we presumed to collect", as it applies to my research moving forward. (46).

Chapter 9: Generating and Collecting Data, from Ackerly, Brooke, and True's book; *Doing Feminist Research in Political & Social Science* will be utilized here to provide a foundation in support of the interview method as a more appropriately qualitative and "co-productive" approach to this instance of participant research. A prominent theme of in Ackerly, Brooke, and True's writing is the claim that any method of scholarship might be feminist to the extent that it understands knowledge is "co-created" with participants, while "attending to boundaries and intersectionality, relationships, and the situatedness of the researcher and research-subject participant" (160-161). A suggested method for accomplishing this is to "revisit the narrative… with the subject participant" as a strategy to "minimize the role of the researcher in constructing… and maximizes the subject-participants' authorship of her own narrative" (167). They also recommend the researcher "suggest analysis during the interview" as an acceptable manner "of 'co-producing' your data" with participants (169).

In considering the above, the following notable issues occurred to me while considering a methodology of anonymous data collection:

1. While granting anonymity to the participant, the researcher disconnects from them. This may seem appropriately “objective”, however it also separates the researcher from the nuance, non-verbal cues, and context of the information the respondent provides. This runs the risk of missing important elements of the story being shared and emptying the data of critical meaning.

2. Related to the above, anonymous data collection forbids us from connecting with participants to collaborate in creation of meaning. The researcher is unable to clarify meaning or ask for elaboration on participant’s responses. This makes it difficult to co-produce knowledge as there is no opportunity for the participants to be involved in on-the-spot analysis with the researcher. As a result, the researcher is left to analyze the data independently, potentially reiterating, an imbalance in the power of knowledge production biased in favour of the researcher/academic institution.

3. In terms of making research results available to participants, this is very difficult when participant identities are unknown. While one can make these results available to public, there doesn’t seem to be a way to ensure, with anonymous participation, that the participants in fact receive the results of the research.

Given the above considerations a real-time discussion would seem the most appropriate methodology to accomplish the stated goal of sharing player's stories. Specifically, the style of interview recommended is what Kristin G. Esterberg describes, in *Qualitative Methods in Social Research*, as "semi-structured interviews" (87). Esterberg explains that "In semi-structured interviews, the goal is to explore a topic more openly and to allow interviewees to express their opinions and ideas in their own words.", noting that although the researcher usually enters with "some basic ideas about what the interview will cover", that "the interviewee's responses shape the order and structure of the interview." (87). For this reason, the option of an interview was made available to participants. Additionally, it seemed prudent allow respondents to have some say in how they communicate their stories, and to include an option which increased the accessibility of the conversation for respondents. For these reasons, to give respondents choice in how to communicate, and to increase accessibility, responses to the questions were accepted in via written submissions as well as being offered in in a verbal interview format.

Given the present need to practice social distancing the interviews were conducted remotely through Zoom Conferencing Application. This has been done with my Zoom account associated with Trent University and following closely the "Zoom Privacy and Security Guide" provided on Trentu.ca in the Information Technology section of the site. These interviews were audio recorded and include a set of standard questions to help guide the discussion

and keep the topics relevant to the research objective. Before beginning the interview, I confirmed the participant has reviewed the letter of introduction and interview questions and reviewed the oral consent script with the interviewee. This was to ensure the interviewee understands the interview purpose, process, and their rights as participants. Before beginning interview questions, participant consent was captured by the audio recording. The letter of introduction, interview questions and consent document were be forwarded to the participant before the interview, following their initial expression of interest in participating. As mentioned above participants would have the option to review the interview questions in written form, send questions to the primary researcher or request clarification, and compose a written response to submit to the study. This option was made available for those who do not have access to the technology required, would rather avoid use of video conferencing technology, or simply preferred to respond in a written format. In this case, the consent document was forwarded as an informed consent form which the participant completed remotely and submitted with the written response. All correspondence was be conducted with my Trent email account (ryankirby@trentu.ca).

To keep this project manageable, the interview sessions were to be kept relatively short (15-30 minutes), with the goal of reaching about 10 participants. The platform for raising awareness and promoting participation was primarily through social media groups associated with *Amtgard* on Facebook, Discord and Reddit. To inform individuals of the opportunity a post was made in these

communities to create initial awareness of the research project and call for participants. An information package was provided to those who indicated interest which included the Written Questions, Introductory Letter and Oral Consent Script associated with this research project. Once an individual expressed interest and was sent the information package, I followed up with them to confirm their participation, their preferred format and schedule a time. I avoided following up more than three times if I didn't receive a response, as this to me suggested they no longer had interest in participation and wanted to make sure the individuals I was talking to were fully on board. There were a reasonable number of individuals who reached out to participate in the study, however only a small number of individuals followed through, with just a few written responses collected, and a single interview. This being said, the information these individuals provided was very interesting in terms of the research question posed, with the interview being especially worthwhile. For this reason, despite the small number of respondents, I think it is worth examining what these members of the community had to say in their responses. All respondents discussed will be referred to by pseudonyms to provide some level of pseudonymity. Each respondent had the opportunity to select a preferred pseudonym to be used.

Though the interview will be semi-structured in nature, I prepared an outline of standard questions which were used to guide the discussion. These questions

are also what were forwarded to those opting for a written response and were as follows:

Qualifying Questions:

1. How long have you been playing *Amtgard? [Minimum 6 months]*
2. Do you regularly role-play as a character (or multiple characters) in the game? *[Qualifying participants would answer "Yes"]*

Research Questions:

3. Does *Amtgard* allow players to design and play characters that might not have been possible in role-playing games such as *World od Warcraft*, or other popular MMORPGs?
    a. If so, are you aware of examples of these sorts of unique in characters in *Amtgard*? Specifically, characters that would not be possible to create in *World of Warcraft*?
    b. Have you played any characters yourself which would not be possible in *World of Warcraft*?
4. When creating your character(s), did you assume any sort of gender in their creation? If so…

a. Would it be easy (or possible) to represent your character's gender within *World of Warcraft's* parameters for character creation?

b. Would you describe your character's gender as…?

    i. Existing within traditional gender binaries of male and female.

    ii. Existing outside of, or resisting, traditional gender binaries.

    iii. Differing from the player's, or character's, gender assigned at birth.

5. Do you have any comments you would like to share regarding *Amtgard's* character creation system, in comparison to the character creation system in *World of Warcraft*?

Participant Written Responses:

As mentioned earlier the objective of this participant research is two-fold. First, to discover if *Amtgard* players believe the ambiguous design of *Amtgard's* character creation system as compared to the character creation systems featured in games such as *World of Warcraft* would allow for the creation of characters which i) Exist outside of traditional gender binary (traditional being

male and female gender roles with gender identities predetermined by anatomy). ii) Differ from the player's, or character's, gender assigned at birth. Second, to discover and illustrate instances of players making use of this more ambiguous character creation system to create characters such as this. I will now share selections from the responses of the study's participants which relate to these two objectives. The first selections reviewed will be from the written responses, and this will be followed by discussion of the verbal interview response. These responses will be accompanied by analysis which makes clear how the opinions and stories being shared contribute to our discussion regarding the importance of freedom and ambiguity in character creation mechanics within game worlds. Finally, before proceeding I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the individuals that took the time to respond to my request for research participants on this topic. It is my opinion that while this project could have been based entirely on theoretical analysis, it is the case that speaking to players who exist in these game worlds is critical to understanding why these design choices matter.

Regarding the question of whether *Amtgard* allows for the creation of characters which would not be possible in typical MMORPGs such as *World of Warcraft*, the respondents agreed that the *Amtgard's* character creation system gave players the opportunity to create characters which would not be possible in WoW's more traditional setting and confirming that they had utilized this in creating characters which would not have been possible in *World of Warcraft*.

This includes the creation of characters which exist outside of traditional gender binary and/or which differ from the player's, or character's, gender assigned at birth.

Belle, who has been played several characters in *Amtgard* and has been active in the *Amtgard* world since for almost two decades stated that they believe *Amtgard* "allows a player the freedom to create any manner of character." In her case, she identifies as female, and plays a female character, while noting that females are an option in *World of Warcraft*. That said they also noted that the character they are playing presently is "a quarter dark-elf, quarter demon, and half-titan" which is "not at all something that can be done in a standard MMORPG." This does not directly support my argument that *Amtgard* allows for creation of characters with gender identities that are not possible in *World of Warcraft*, but it does give some indication of the sort of freedom afforded by *Amtgard's* character creation system. I also wanted to include their response, since it is important to note that not everyone will necessarily utilize the ambiguity of *Amtgard's* character creation system in a way which is disruptive to traditional gender binary schema, and to acknowledge that such a system allows for more the creation of characters with more traditional gender identities. This is part of the advantage of such an open system, that it includes more traditional character configurations, while allowing players to express themselves as they desire, and in whatever way they desire. In Belle's case, her breaking from the mold didn't correspond with gender identity, but rather with

their character's "complicated" ancestry. For Belle, playing a female character "felt easiest" and so this is what she chose.

Esma has been in *Amtgard* for over 3 years and says that for much of that time she "role-played very regularly, and even picked up a second character". This is something that hasn't been mentioned yet, but in *Amtgard* you can create and play as multiple characters, very similarly to how you can create and play more than one character in the most online MMORPGs. Similarly, to Belle, Esma identifies as female and plays female characters in *Amtgard*, stating "When creating my characters, I wanted them to have the same gender identity and expression as my own". Esma acknowledges that she would "describe (their) characters' genders as existing within traditional gender binaries of male and female." And that because of this it would be possible to represent their characters' genders in *World of Warcraft*, "but only because I am lucky enough to have that gender represented.".

Though Esma states that her characters both "identify as female and are femme presenting, so rather heteronormative and possible in *World of Warcraft*", she also comments that in terms of experiences, abilities, and even race, neither of these characters would be possible." This hints at the flexibility afforded by *Amtgard's* character creation, compared to the limitations found in *World of Warcraft* and Esma elaborates on this affordance regarding gender in detail writing that:

> *Amtgard* absolutely allows players to design and play characters that are not possible in other role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft*. *World of Warcraft* is limiting in a few ways, but especially in terms of gender, as each playable race generally shows sexual dimorphism that follows heteronormativity. *Amtgard's* only limitation is our own minds. We're able to play characters of any gender identity and expression, and though both games offer the opportunity to role-play as a character who does not share your gender, *Amtgard* isn't limited to two which follow gender roles.

She uses the term limiting once again when speaking of character creation in *World of Warcraft*, describing the options provided as "limiting". Building on this, she states that a "progressive step" for "all games" would be for characters to be created "without forcing us to select a social construct, like gender, while still having access to all physical appearance items." While adding suggestion that there could be inquiry regarding preferred pronouns when appropriate. This is an interesting point, as it touches on something I agree with personally… more specifically, it is not to my opinion, nor the argument of this writing that one should not identify as male/female in games, or that these options should not exist at all; The solution to gender bias and sexism is not the erasure of gender and sex. The argument I would make is rather that necessitation of selecting between one of the two binary options is problematic, and the stereotypical gendering of these options through cosmetics, character models, body types and

attributes exclusively tied to the gender selected by the player compounds on this problem.

Sylvie has been playing *Amtgard* for over 3 years. The character they roleplay is active in kingdom wide events as well as online roleplay sessions that have become more common with measures promoting social distancing. When asked if *Amtgard* allow players to design and play characters that might not have been possible in role-playing games they answer “Yes, I believe so” and provide the following examples, including their own character in the discussion:

> I have a friend who plays flesh monster that eats people. I've also met a literal bear who was turned into a human, but still thinks he's a bear, a man torn between two identities as he grapples with the demon who possesses him, and multiple different types of animal-folk. My main persona is a monkey-folk forest priest/monk.

When asked if they assumed any sort of gender identity when creating their character for *Amtgard* Sylvie states that they did, and that they consider their character in the game to be non-binary. They acknowledge this character as existing outside of the gender binary, as well as matching their own gender and differing from the gender they were assigned at birth. In other words, Sylvie identifies outside the gender binary, an identity which differs from what they were assigned at birth, and they have been able to represent that identity satisfactorily in *Amtgard.* When asked if it would be possible to represent this

same identity in *World of Warcraft's* parameters for character creation, they respond that they "don't think so", going on to state that "WoW characters tend to be aggressively male or female, to the point that I feel uncomfortable playing female characters even though that's what I usually default to when there are only two options.". This echoes commentary from scholars in earlier chapters who states that aside from issues with character creation and representation in terms of gender, the culture in *World of Warcraft* is often one that is dominated by hypermasculine culture and prone to causing discomfort for those who do not fit the hypermasculine profile sometimes found in the culture of online games.

This brings us to an interesting point regarding *Amtgard*, specifically that game design is only one part of the equation. A culture of acceptance is also important in supporting identities which fall outside normative ideologies. I think this is important to mention as I would not be so bold to claim that good game design constitutes a welcoming and open culture, however I would suggest that it is an excellent starting point for fostering such a culture of openness and acceptance. In *Amtgard* we see this I believe; the opportunity for expression of these identities, of these selves which is supported by both the game design and the community that plays the game. I should note here that this claim cannot be absolute, as there always seems to be aspects of intolerance or popular stereotypes that might find their way into a space, including *Amtgard*. It does however seem to be the case that such characters, given the ability to exist within the world have opportunity to find acceptance in the space. To put it

another way, I would not argue that more ambiguous and flexible character design causes games and communities to automatically become more accepting; Humans still have their biases and prejudices, and many may act unkindly and bring problematic ideas regarding sex and gender into the space. I do believe though, that addressing sexism in character creation and game design is an excellent first step to improving these spaces as it grants a measure of representation and validation to individuals that fall outside of normative ideologies in terms of gender identity.

To summarize the above, *Amtgard* is certainly not perfect, and from my time in the space I can attest to anecdotal evidence of growing pains as the space reckons with elements of its own culture which were sexist and exclusionary. I have also seen however, an effort by the community to create a more inclusive space which include revisions to spells, game names, and fostering of progressive social collectives within the space that have endeavored to create a more inclusive space. We can see evidence of this having effect in the accounts of the players interviewed as well. Sylvie had the following to say regarding *Amtgard's* character creation and culture:

> *Amtgard's* character creation system (or lack thereof, let's be honest) has pros and cons. On one hand, there are so few guidelines that you truly can be whatever you want. There are no gender restrictions, which should be the default for a fantasy game in my opinion. And a good difference between *Amtgard*/LARP in general and WoW/MMORPGs in

> general is online, people take your character's appearance at face value. If you play a female model, people will assume you are female. This kind of sucks if your only options are male and female and neither of those fit you. Whereas in LARP, no one expects anyone to look exactly like their character. I'm not covered in red fur on real life, but everyone accepts that I'm a monkey-person. I may look like what society deems a woman, but Amtgarders can accept that I (or at the very least, my character) am not a woman.

This sentiment regarding the culture of *Amtgard* is echoed by Esma who describes the character creation system as “limitless” and allowing characters in the game to be “whoever and whatever we want them to be.” Esma goes on to state that this affordance is coupled with “little to no judgement because our community is so welcoming and safe.” Of course, these are individual experiences, and do not show us the whole picture. That said it is a welcome situation to know that for some players they can not only create these sorts of characters but also have them be accepted in the space. A starting point for fostering this sort of progressive and inclusive gaming community could very well be a system which does not limit players from creating characters with identities which exist outside of heteronormative ideology, though there is certainly more to it than that. Regardless it is an option which would be welcome in more traditional settings as a way to work towards cultivating more inclusive gaming communities. Esma summarizes my thoughts regarding this quite well:

> There is nothing (in the *Amtgard* character creation system) forcing us to define our character by selecting limiting options, which is the case in *World of Warcraft*. For games like *World of Warcraft*, and all games in general, the next progressive step would be to have us play our characters without forcing us to select a social construct, like gender, while still having access to all physical appearance items.

Participant Interview Response:

In addition to the responses from players in written format, I also had the opportunity to conduct a remote interview with a long-time player regarding their experience with *Amtgard* in relation to this research project. Possibly because the format was more conversational, this remote interview resulted in much more information being shared then in the case of the written responses. For this reason, it seems appropriate to consider this response in its own section and do a deeper dive into the conversation regarding *Amtgard* which took place in our discussion.

My discussion with Hera begins with an overview of what we will be chatting about, and an inquiry into how long Hera has been playing *Amtgard*; The answer is about 15 years, plenty of time for her to develop a robust understanding of the game system and of her own character in relation to the game world. From here we move quickly to consideration of *Amtgard* character

creation in relation to character creation in other game worlds. When asked if *Amtgard* allows for the creation of characters which would not be possible in games such as *World of Warcraft* Hera's response was "absolutely… there is quite a lot of freedom when creating your character." And went on to comment that because of *Amtgard* is a Live Action Roleplaying game the players "have the opportunity to actually go out live and portray the characters that we create." This is experience they compare to "having your dream role in a play… you get to create your back story, what they wear…" Finally, Hera summarizes the process as "very customizable and rather freeing to be able to create a person (character) like that and to go out and express it through yourself." There is a lot of depth to these comments and plenty that could be inferred and unpacked, but I think the most interesting comment is that this ability to create any character without game system limitations is an "expression" which is "freeing". In previous chapters we have touched on the idea that a player's avatar in a game world is an expression of the self and these comments do well in demonstrating that less restrictive character creation systems could allow for more meaningful expressions of the self through character creation and embodiment.

Following this I asked Hera if she were aware of any examples of unique characters in *Amtgard* that wouldn't be possible in a game like *World of Warcraft*. To which she responded that they believed her own character was a good example. Hera's account of her character gives a good example of what is

possible in *Amtgard,* so I will include their description here. Hera begins by describing her character as “nonsense… absolute nonsense” and elaborates with the following: “She is a pirate, who is also an Animagus (magic user who can transform into an animal) werewolf, and a phoenix vessel… and an anti-paladin, and an archer… so many random things encompassed in one being is nonsense”. It is worth noting here that Hera gives disclaimer that not all these attributes were part of the character creation, and some were acquired through play as their character interacted with the world, it’s narrative and other players. As she put it “your character evolves so much over time… 15 years down the line you barely recognize them”.

After this summary of Hera’s character and their traits I inquired if she assumed any sort of gender for her character when she created them. The answer to this question was not only interesting, but I believe significant in relation to my suggestion that expressions of self through character creation and embodiment in game worlds can lead to important and meaningful expressions of self. Hera answers with the following:

> When I first started, she was female… The strange thing is she was bi, and it took me almost 15 years to realize that I was too… I lived my life through her before I lived it for myself. And also… in kind of the same way too, because I’m Ace… I’m biromantic asexual… she (my character) just never did sexual things… so that was like, from the start and never really clicked in with me that that was just me.

Following this response, I took a moment to confirm and clarify by asking "So it sort of manifested in the character, and was played out in the world of *Amtgard*… And participating in that character, in that way, led you to understand yourself better?" Hera's response to this was yes. This resonated with my own experience, so I took a moment to share how playing my own character in *Amtgard* had led me to a better understanding of myself. As previously mentioned, part of my reason for writing this paper was that as I participated in the world of *Amtgard* I realized traits and qualities I had imbued my character with were characteristics of myself which I had not previously had opportunity to explore and understand. I commented regarding my own experience and that "I started to see that with people in *Amtgard*, where it seemed there was some exploration and experimentation through characters." Which was something that Hera agreed to having noticed. It appears I am not alone in my observations regarding the exploration of self within the world of *Amtgard*.

My next question for Hera was whether it would be possible to represent her character's gender within *World of Warcraft's* parameters for character creation. Hera admitted that she have not actually played *World of Warcraft* but based on her knowledge of "online MMOs" Hera "didn't believe so". Hera elaborated that though she considered her character, and herself, as female identifying she believed they both had traditionally masculine tendencies and characteristics that were not represented in the character creation options of most multiplayer role-playing games. As she puts it "The thing with my character

and quite frankly myself is that… (we) associate with female but have masculine tendencies…I don't just go 'I'm a girl' and that's it." Clothing came into the discussion of representation as well, with Hera explaining "I don't like wearing skirts, I wear pants…" and describes her character as dressing in terms of "the traditional pirate coat, britches and hat, not anywhere close to women's garb of that era." - emphasizing in particular "she doesn't dress like a man". In terms of whether Hera would be able to represent their character in *World of Warcraft* she states that "it would depend on whether or not they could be a female and dress in male garb." This point reminds me my story in the introduction regarding clothing options for the male and female avatars in *Pokémon GO.* As you might recall, I discussed that I had realized with *Pokémon GO* that the male and female avatars featured distinct and exclusive options for character customization with jewelry, tights, skirts, and dresses all being options for female avatars only, whereas the selection for male avatars monopolized primarily loose-fitting shirts and pants. The issue with many character creation (and customization) systems in games is not just the insistence of gender binary, but the representation of these gender identities as being locked into stereotypical gender roles and presentations. The trouble here is that in many character creation systems it is not possible to adorn your avatar with clothing options other then what would be considered traditionally appropriate for their gender.

The next question posed was whether Hera would describe her character's gender as existing within traditional binaries of male and female? Her

answer to this was “Not necessarily” with elaboration that she felt her character existed “somewhere on a sliding gauge”. When asked if she would consider her character’s gender as existing outside of, or resisting, traditional gender binaries Hera answers “Yes.” Explaining that her character “doesn’t conform well” to traditional binaries and citing “the act of not dressing like a woman” as her “own sort of way of rebelling.” The next question was to ask if Hera would describe her character’s gender as differing from either her gender assigned at birth, or her characters gender assigned at birth. Hera paused for a moment at this question before responding “I would say that we are fairly similar… we both have the same gender at birth, but with far more masculine tendencies then our gender would be normally considered to have.” Following this however she commented “I’m creeping more to non-binary in a sense, but I’m not fully there yet, I would say. But if I were on a gauge, I would not be close to woman on that gauge. I’m farther away from it.” This led to an interesting discussion on the definition of non-binary which went as follows:

> Hera: (questioning their previous response) … non-binary would be neither male nor female, if I’m correct? Would it be gender fluid? Would that be the correct term?
>
> Ryan: I hesitate to say because I think it’s so incredibly varied in the way people practice it and identify themselves. My understanding of non-binary is that it’s often expressed as sort of ditching the traditional

binaries and saying, ‘forget male/female I’m something different entirely’. My understanding of gender fluid is that it can include non-binary gender identifications, and it can include male and female presentations.

Hera: Okay

Ryan: If that makes sense? It’s a bit of a rabbit hole… I guess what I’m saying is I don’t want to presume anything… If you would say gender-fluid then I think that you can claim that, based on what you’ve said especially. And non-binary, could also be incorporated in gender-fluid. For myself part of my gender fluidity is sometimes I don’t feel like either.

Hera: Ya.

Ryan: I know some people that are gender fluid they are more like “Sometimes I feel femme and sometimes I feel masc. But I know that there are also individuals who sometimes they feel femme and sometimes they feel not femme or masc.

Hera: Ya, oh my gosh. Okay, so that’s definitely more of how I feel. Because there’s definitely points where if I’m wearing certain things or doing certain activities, I feel more feminine. Like okay, I’m a girl then… But then there’s moments where I’m just like ‘oh my god I’m so masc.’ Like I feel so masc, this is… oh my god what am I, this seems so different

from what I see in the mirror. And then there's times where I don't really feel this one or this one. I'm just… I don't know where I'm at. I'm just not like… not really quite there or there, I just feel sort of nebulous… Ya I've never really thought about it; I've never realized that was a thing… It was only recently that I learned that bi-romantic was a thing, and that asexual was a thing. I went through most of my life thinking I was broken… That's how it was kind of posed in my head… through just what people would say. Now that I know that there's names, and that I understand who and what I am it'd been a rather interesting exploration.

Ryan: I feel like I can relate to that in some form. It's like once you have the words, and the understanding of the words, and the terms, it's like this is a legitimate way people can exist. It opens up another option.

Hera: Ya!

I felt this exchange was important to include for a couple reasons. First, it was a significant point in our discussion regarding our own journeys with queer identity. Second, I think it highlights the importance of having options for personal expression and self-discovery, which speaks to the value of open and ambiguous worlds for us to play in. I wouldn't go so far as to claim that without *Amtgard* neither of us would have found opportunities to understand and explore these aspects of ourselves. I would however put forward that participating in *Amtgard* and exploring these parts of ourselves through our

characters appears to have been helpful in developing a better understanding of these aspects of ourselves and our queer identities. It is worthwhile to note that we both speak towards the value of education regarding queer identity and terminology, as well as the cultural acceptance of these terms and identities as legitimate modes of being. The significance of these factors should certainly not be understated, and still, it seems that having a space to explore the self can play a critical role in one's examination of themselves.

The final question inquired as to if Hera had any comments regarding *Amtgard's* character creation system compared to more traditional character creation systems in role-playing games, or any comments in general she would like to share. Hera gave her opinion that "It is far more freeing to be able to customize, to the very stitch of your coat, your character from the ground up." And furthermore, to be able to "live that character." Which could speak to the unique opportunity live action role-playing games present for players to embody their character physically. This point regarding physical embodiment is mentioned again as Hera suggests that "a computer based role-playing system can be enough, but for others they are still hyper aware that they are sitting in front of a screen." This point is worth acknowledging. Though I've made the case that virtual worlds are qualified by their affordance of social interaction, and noted separation from every lived reality, it is undeniable that the fantastical worlds of live action role-playing games, based in the physical world differ from the experience of a playing with a digital avatar. However, I maintain that there

is much to be learned from the design of live action role-playing games which could be of benefit to shaping more inclusive digital game systems. The physical embodiment offered in live action role-playing games can also be limiting in many ways. These sorts of games are such that physical limitations might be a barrier to participation in the game, and importantly, the presence of a player's physical body in the game world can (and almost certainly will) impact their social interactions in the space as aspects of physical appearance can be perceived and judged by other players. This is not the case in most digital game spaces as the digital avatar body serves as the anchor for their social interactions, and appearance, in the game world. Because the digital avatar bodies exist digitally, their customization is limited only by the design of the character creation system, and not by the physical characteristics and physical body of the player. Hera points this out and gives example in our interview stating the following:

> The only challenge where the other types of game formats have an edge is what you can portray. If I wanted to be a 9-foot-tall giant with tentacle arms and lava legs… there's only so much I can do through costuming to be able to pull off that sort of thing… There are certain things where it's hard to feel the connection, to feel like your actually that person if you can't portray it… It can be hard to portray a character that you can't physically portray.

This comment and line of discussion, I believe, also lends credit to the importance of having an avatar whose characteristics represent the character you are trying to play. Hera speaks to this regarding her own character, sharing the following account of her challenge with portraying aspects of her character in *Amtgard*:

> She became what was essentially a werewolf, but then I was just like… I do not look like a werewolf… So, then all of a sudden having to portray a werewolf… with no prosthetics, or masks or anything, I was like I can't do this. I need something physically to actually change my look, to actually look like a werewolf. It's taken quite some time but I think I finally did it. I had to make a muscle suit to change my silhouette and everything, I went all out on this thing, and I'm super proud of it. It was something that irked me really bad, that I felt that I wasn't being true to the character, and I wasn't performing the character, and it didn't feel like the character. Losing that connection was something that didn't sit well with me.

Hera mentions above that playing a character in *Amtgard* is akin to a performance, which is alluded to again later in the interview, as she states, "There's a lot of trust that you need to have with your acting partners… a lot of cooperation and collaboration." This speaks to the importance of the social aspect of *Amtgard's* game world, something I've argued is an essential characteristic of what should be considered a virtual world. The last thing from

the interview I wanted to share was a comment from Hera that supports our claim regarding the importance of the social aspect of virtual worlds. Specifically, Hera states that "That's one of the cool things about this too; It's the community. When you're role-playing it's not just you… You are interacting with other characters, your forming bonds… It's a lot of folks… that are there to support each other and to build a world together, that we can all live in."

Closing Thoughts:

As described above, the participant research component of this project is intended to explore the possibility of players utilizing *Amtgard's* ambiguous character creation system to constitute characters which the player identifies as expressive and/or representative of gender(s) which: i) Exist outside of traditional gender binary (traditional being male and female gender roles with gender identities predetermined by anatomy). ii) Differ from the player's, or character's, gender assigned at birth. The objective of this study is both to find out if *Amtgard* players agree that *Amtgard's* character creation system allows for the creation of such characters, and to discover if this potential is utilized by players in creating these sorts of characters. Following consideration of the responses collected it does seem to be the case that respondents regard *Amtgard's* character creation system as making these sorts of characters possible. Furthermore, some respondents reported that they have either done

so themselves or were aware of players who have utilized the ambiguity of *Amtgard's* character creation system in such a way. Finally, we have evidence from the interviews that players agree regarding the potential of the more ambiguous character creation system in *Amtgard* in providing opportunity to explore and express aspects of the self in relation to gender identity. These results certainly server to reinforce this research project's claim that more ambiguous character creation systems provide meaningful opportunities not just for expression of the self, but also as sites which allow for disruption of heteronormative ideology.

These claims should be misread as argument that more ambiguous character creation systems equate to an acceptance and embrace of persons who fall outside of normative ideology. It does however seem to be the case that such characters, given the ability to exist within the world have opportunity to find acceptance in the space. I do believe though, that addressing sexism in character creation and game design is an excellent first step to improving these spaces as it grants a measure of representation and validation to individuals that fall outside of normative ideologies in terms of gender identity. Additionally, cultivating spaces which allow for authentic expressions of the self, representations of non-binary identities and exploration of personal identity appears to hold significant merit for individuals who feel marginalized by more traditional systems and limited representation in these playful spaces. As Hera suggested, this ability to create any character without game system limitations

could be considered an “expression” which is “freeing”. In previous chapters we have touched on the idea that a player’s avatar in a game world is an expression of the self and these comments do well in demonstrating that less restrictive character creation systems could allow for more meaningful expressions of the self through character creation and embodiment.

I’ve commented regarding my own experience with *Amtgard’s* character creation system and regarding my own observations of exploration and experimentation through characters in *Amtgard*, and this is something the respondents have noticed, and practiced, as well. It seems to be the case that others share in my observations regarding the exploration of self within the world of *Amtgard*, and that the ambiguous system of character creation it features does offer meaningful opportunity for players understand and explore their own gender identity.

Conclusion:

What began as an observation of gendered clothing options in the mobile game *Pokémon Go* has developed into consideration of how gendered mechanics are often integrated into the design of virtual worlds in games by way of character creation mechanics and avatar aesthetics. This research paper is the result; It's intent being to highlight the ways in which character creation serves to reinforce heteronormative imperatives through the necessitation of gendered character creation mechanics, and the way that games realize these gendered player avatars in virtual worlds.

The first chapter calls upon Judith Butler's account of gender as performative to establish gender identity as something that is constituted and reinforced through the repetition of acts. Heteronormative ideology is considered here as a force which works to establish the domains of intelligible subjects, and abjects, by adherence to traditional gender binaries. Furthermore, Haraway's account of the post gender potential is discussed as a means by which virtual worlds and digital avatars might provide means of resistance against the heteronormative imperative for gender queer individuals. This premise that virtual worlds might act as a site a site of resistance in this way is built upon in the second chapter as virtual worlds, avatar embodiment and play are considered in terms of gender identity and materiality. This is accomplished by referencing the work of Boellstorff to define virtual worlds as being distinct from

our own but grounded in real human interaction and socialization. Player's engagement with these worlds is made possible by the player's avatar which represents them in the space and acts as a mode of virtual selfhood for the player, and as the body which anchors their engagement with these worlds. With this understanding of virtual worlds as meaningful social realities and the avatar's materiality as a representation of self in these social settings, it is hopefully clear the importance of Sicart's claim regarding the potential of play, and playgrounds (or game worlds) to be sites of resistance through their potential for ambiguity which is disruptive to the heteronormative imperative and the schema of traditional gender binaries.

The third chapter demonstrated the problematic ways in which gender is designed in popular contemporary virtual game worlds with detailed analysis of *World of Warcraft* as well as discussion of *Rust* and *Cyberpunk2077. Rust* and *Cyberpunk 2077* both have a unique approach to gender design in their respective games, however these remain problematic in that they still adhere to the gender binary in facilitating player experience. The analysis of *World of Warcraft's* character creation process and avatar design demonstrates in detail showing blatant and obvious sexism, and sexualization in its design. The purpose of this chapter is assessment and critique of how gender is often designed into the character creation systems of video game worlds and though there are bound to be exceptions, I think it does well in highlighting the problematic approach utilized in the design of popular games. Chapter four focused on

review of the game design, gameplay, character creation process, and game mechanics of *Amtgard*. The intent of this overview was to cultivate an understanding of the potential and merit of *Amtgard's* ambiguous character creation system. To summarize, character creation is designed into *Amtgard,* but at no point in its design does it mention, or request that the player select a gender for their character.

With an understanding of the problematic ways many games handle gender in their character creation design and having shared the method *Amtgard* employs which omits gender as part of the character creation process, the final chapter seeks to answer if this difference in design makes a difference for the players. This was accomplished by interviewing and surveying players from *Amtgard* regarding their experience with character creation in *Amtgard* compared to other games (with *World of Warcraft* as an example), in the context of gender identity. From review of the responses, it should be clear that the difference in design of *Amtgard's* character creation system is not just acknowledged by players but also utilized in meaningful acts of expression, self-exploration, and resistance against heteronormative ideology.

In this paper it has been demonstrated that character creation systems in popular games often reinforce the heteronormative imperative by designs which make adherence to traditional gender binaries a prerequisite, and which incorporate sexism and sexualization into their design. Furthermore, the case has been made as to why such practices are problematic in terms of repressing

those whose identities fall outside of the heteronormative ideology. This has been juxtaposed with a game world which omits binary gender selection from its character creation process, and it has been found that such a system is actively utilized by players in actively resisting and disrupting the heteronormative imperative. For these reasons I would once again suggest that game designers work to incorporate a more ambiguous design into their character creation systems. Or, at the very least, work towards systems which do not necessitate selection from within the gender binary, and which work to omit overt sexism and sexualization of avatar design.

This may seem a small thing to many, but speaking as an individual who identifies as genderqueer, and nonbinary, it is the sort of thing that is impossible to ignore once you become aware of it. In the first chapter I discussed Butler's claims that the reinforcement of the gender binary and heteronormative imperative relegates those who do not fit into the realm of the abject and the inhuman. This is essentially the issue with games which design their character creation to incorporate, and necessitate, adherence to these categories of identity. The problem with *Pokémon* asking "Are you a boy? Or are you a girl?" is that it infers that these are the only two valid options. Anything else is considered unintelligible – less than human.

Figure 14 - Professor Oak from Pokemon asking an important question before the player begins their Pokémon journey.

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