

No Longer a Boy's Club: The Virtual World's Effect on Gender Fluidity

Zianne Cuff

Western culture has come to view gender as a binary concept, with only two fixed options: male or female. Because of this, gender fluidity is quite possibly one of the most controversial topics in present society. If one were to strip the terms "sex" and "gender" down to their very cores, they would appear to be nothing more than interchangeable synonyms. However, this is a common misconception. The term "sex" focuses more on the biological aspects of human design. Sex entails all of the chromosomal aspects of the human body—such as the genetic material, hormones, internal reproductive structures, and external genitalia—that are the byproducts of copulation passed down from one temporary vehicle to the next (Dawkins). However, gender is far more complicated. With the inclusion of all of one's physical traits, gender is the interrelationship between one's physical traits and one's internal sense of identification—how you perceive yourself in regards to sex—as well as how one presents oneself to the world in terms of behavior.

In "It's Your Gender, Stupid!" R.A. Wilchins observes just how controversial the designation of two universal genders has been within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning, intersex, asexual, allies, and pansexual (LGBTQQIAAP) community. Wilchins states that many learn how to decipher one gender from the other simply by "knowing it when you see it" which basically means observing mannerisms and how people dress or behave. However, there is a bit of an issue with this idea that people are either one or the other. For instance, Wilchins brings up the topic of transsexuality and gender fluidity in that one feels discomfort with being confined to the idea of being forced into one gender category or the other. She then states that picking a singular gender, much like confining one's sexual preference, is restrictive and only the beginning of the problematic nature that comes with identifying oneself in this world. One shouldn't have to bend to fit into a space where he or she does not belong, since not everyone identifies as cissexual, i.e., is comfortable with their extremities and identifies by them accordingly.

Gender fluidity can be defined as a more flexible range of gender expression, where the person who identifies as *gender flexible* may have interests and behaviors that fluctuate from day to day. A recent article stated that "gender fluidity in women is a contingent adaptation that increased ancestral women's ability to form pair bonds with female alloparents who helped them rear children to reproductive age" (Kuhle 305).

How does this concept of gender fluidity carry over into the virtual world? Presently, with the continuous advancements of our society via technology, many are breaking free of this constrictive one-or-the-other mentality and are adopting a more open means of defining themselves. Many have taken to other avenues such as the virtual world, where all identities are masked under a façade and altered at the creator's whim, and where they can live vicariously through any avatar. Since the online world does not abide by the same social stigmas as reality, a woman can very well create a male avatar and vice versa without being subject to the gender stereotyping that may occur in the real world. Virtual identities and virtual experiences often correlate directly to physical ones. In the mid-1990s, an early server by the name of LambdaMOO was one of the most popular text-based online communities and has been critically acclaimed as a highly influential examination of virtual and social issues. *My Tiny Life*, written by Julian Dibbell, recounts his adventures in LambdaMOO and describes the social, sexual, and aesthetic aspects of MOO life. Dibbell states in his book that "Gender fluidity was a very unspoken concept in LambdaMOO; people did not disclose their real genders and often played underneath the façade of numerous virtual personas"(1). Today, with virtual worlds such as Second Life and IMVU, there is a similar pattern among users. Since these servers receive a great deal of traffic on a day-to-day basis, they are ideal magnets for those who wish to explore the concepts of gender fluidity to its fullest by creating a multitude of identities and correlating emotional intensities for each avatar in order to make the character playtime more enjoyable.

The virtual world has allowed a space for people to anonymously venture into the sex and gender of their choice without condemnation. This environment grants players an endless number of opportunities in regard to creation and customization relating to how a player appears. As Nick Yee and Jeremy Bailenson note:

A line of research known as the "Proteus Effect" has shown that users conform to stereotypes based on their avatar's appearance. Thus, participants given attractive avatars provided more information about themselves to a confederate stranger than participants given unattractive avatars. In addition to putting participants in someone else's body, virtual environments also allow participants to watch their avatar (i.e. themselves) do something they never did (274).

Not only can a singular person fulfill his or her innermost desires, that person can also carry them out with others who share similar interests. If people were apprehensive to experiment with fluidity in a real world situation, they can simply create an avatar to explore their curiosities without finding themselves on the receiving end of judgment.

Virtual life continues to become more widespread as it becomes increasingly (if not more) important than our realities ever have been. We seek solace in strangers behind user names because they too may be going through similar situations (in regard to struggling with daily social woes and the like), or

at least claim that they are. Online play is slowly becoming a matter of preference for the general population, putting the gaming category at the forefront of technological culture. But it is important to ask ourselves: "Are there negative effects of gaming (as it relates to gender) that need to be critically examined?"

One of the downsides to virtual gaming from a statistical standpoint is that, "88.5% of game developers are male and 92% of developers are heterosexual. Also, both female and LGBTQ game developers held stronger opinions that the game industry lacks diversity and that diversity has a direct impact on the games produced" (*Game Developer Demographics*). Therefore, the viewpoint of the majority of games is largely based upon a homogenous contingent of game developers: heterosexual males (Pascoe).

The minorities of the gaming community in terms of video gaming are the women, those within the LGBTQIAAP community, and the people who identify as gender fluid. With the representation of this demographic being so very small in number, the depictions of characters that represent these characteristics (e.g. female characters, LGBTQIAAP characters, etc.) are often misconstrued, as they are created to cater to the whims of a relatively heterosexual male populace. Gaming developers create their female characters based off of what they want to see. A recurring theme within the gaming world is that most playable female characters are often portrayed as mere objects for sexual gratification. They're either scantily clad and over-sexualized in a way that's highly unrealistic or they're a means for physical, emotional, or sexual abuse at the whims of the male player or their evil counterpart (the antagonist); examples of this can be seen in games such as "Grand Theft Auto," "Red Dead Redemption," and "Watch Dogs."

Virtual worlds will continue to thrive. These homes of creation are the meeting grounds for people from all walks of life to come together for a common purpose. There is still much work to be done in terms of dealing with prejudices that come with being a member of the LGBTQIAAP and active gamer community. However, it is easy to mask gender identity and other aspects of oneself that exist on the virtual spectrum. In essence, you leave behind all of your insecurities, the "comfortable" boxes that society carves out for you, so you can embrace the life that you wish to live.

I am of the belief that gender fluidity is a very present thing and should not be simply dismissed. Humans, by nature, are relatively curious beings, and many of us cannot settle with one thing simply because society deems it acceptable. I also believe that we have far too many labels within our society that pigeonhole us into categories that divide us. In terms of sexuality, we have become rather desperate to stake our claim as individuals. If we do not fall under the title of "straight" but don't deem ourselves to be "homosexual" or "asexual," then surely there is another means of defining what we are, since society enforces that we must have a label and fit into a category based upon either physicality or behavior.

Sexuality and gender are at the forefront of discussion in today's society, both in reality and on the virtual plane. Accepting gender blindness means that not all of us fit into the binary concepts that others consider acceptable. Sure, being able to label oneself as one or the other makes us human to some extent, but we are far more than the "accessories" that naturally adorn our bodies.

Works Cited

- Dawkins, R. *The Selfish Gene* (30th ed). New York: Oxford University Press. 2006. Print.
- Dibbell, J. *My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World*. New York: Henry Holt. 1999. Print.
- Game Developer Demographics: An Exploration of Workforce Diversity*. International Game Developers Association. Retrieved from http://archives.igda.org/diversity/IGDA_DeveloperDemographics_Oct05.pdf. Web. 2005
- Kuhle, B. X. "Born Both Ways: The Alloparenting Hypothesis for Gender and Sexual Fluidity in Women" *Evolutionary Psychology*, 11(2), 2013. 304-323. Print.
- Pascoe, C. J. *Dude You're a Fag: Masculinity and Sexuality in High School*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press. 2007. Print.
- Wilchins, R. A. "It's Your Gender, Stupid!" *GenderQueer: Voices from Beyond The Sexual Binary*. Eds. J. Nestle, C. Howell, and R. A. Wilchins Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2002. 23-32. Print.
- Yee, N. & Jeremy N. Bailenson. "The Proteus Effect: Self-transformations in Virtual Reality" *Human Communication Research*, 33, 2007. 271-290. Print.

Nominating faculty: Professor Reneta Lansiquot, English 1773, Department of English, School of Arts & Sciences, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

Cite as: Cuff, Z. (2015). No longer a boy's club: The virtual world's effect on gender fluidity. *City Tech Writer*, 10, 18-21. Online at <https://openlab.citytech.cuny.edu/city-tech-writer-sampler/>