Gender Swapping on the Internet

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Abstract

In text-based virtual reality environments on the Internet called MUDs, it is possible to pretend to be the opposite gender. In these virtual worlds, the way gender structures basic human interaction is often noticed and reflected upon. This paper introduces MUDs, and then presents a community discussion about gender issues that MUDs inspired. Next, a case study of one gender swapper examines why he chose to gender swap and what he and others around him learned from that experience. Gender swapping is one

is regularly posted to the USENET news group rec.games.mud.announce.

at the Media Lab called MediaMOO,[5] you see the description:

> >connect guest
> Okay,... guest is in use. Logging you in as `Green_Guest'
> *** Connected ***
> The LEGO Closet
> It's dark in here, and there are little crunchy plastic things under your feet! Groping around, you discover what feels like a doorknob on one wall.
> Obvious exits: out to The E&L Garden

MediaMOO is a virtual representation of the MIT Media Lab. Typing "out" gets you to the

surprised at how they are treated when they log on as a female character. Andrew writes on the newsgroup rec.games.mud:[8]

[7] MicroMUSE is at chezmoto.ai.mit.edu 4201.

[8] This is an excerpt from a USENET discussion on about MUDs. Communications technologies have complex interactions. Since most MUDders have read

> Back when I had time for MUD, I, too, played female characters. I found it extraordinarily interesting. It gave me a slightly more concrete understanding of why some women say, "Men suck." It was both amusing and disturbing.

Female characters are often besieged with attention. By typing using the *who* command, it is possible to get a list of all characters logged on. The *page* command allows one to talk to people not in the same room. Many male players will get a list of all present, and then page characters with female names. Unwanted attention and sexual advances create an uncomfortable atmosphere for women in MUDs, just as they do in real life.

Many people, both male and female, enjoy the attention paid to female characters. Male players will often log on as female characters and behave suggestively, further encouraging sexual advances. Pavel Curtis has noted that the most promiscuous and sexually aggressive women are usually played by men. If you meet a character named "FabulousHotBabe," she is almost certainly a he in real life [3].

Perhaps more damaging than unwanted sexual advances are unrequested offers of assistance. Carol, an experienced programmer who runs a MUD in Britain, writes on rec.games.mud:

> What I *do* think is funny is this misconception I really should move house...)).

The constant assumption that women need help can be damaging to a woman's sense of self esteem and competence. If people treat you like an incompetent, you may begin to believe it. Carol here is honest and astute enough to admit that women as well as men help create this problem— sometimes she acts helpless when she's simply "tired and can't be bothered" to complete an uninteresting or unpleasant task.

In the same netnews discussion, Dennis concurs with Carol:

> I played a couple of muds as a female, one making