Thomas Hereford

Henry Ferrill

Richard Colby

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Gender Depictions in World of Warcraft

It is common in video games—especially fantasy games—for game designers to exaggerate the physical features of characters that exist in the game. When one thinks of fantasy genre characters, the males are typically hulking giants with unrealistically large armor and weapons and the females are bone-thin with large breasts and revealing armor. However, is this always true? How do video game players respond to these exaggerated gender depictions? There is a significant amount of previous research on this topic. The questions were analyzed in two parts: the first is a quantitative study of the many different characters of World of Warcraft and the second is a qualitative study of the how a typical user responds to our findings in part one. World of Warcraft (WoW) is an excellent platform for research because it is very widely played and understood (10.2 million users worldwide). WoW also has depth that a lot of other fantasy games do not, that is, there are 13 different character races (Human, Night Elf, Orc, etc.), and 11 different character classes within them (although not all classes are available to all races). This provides a diverse selection of fantasy characters from many different, but recognizable, backgrounds. For instance, there are typical fantasy races such as Humans, Dwarves, Elves, Goblins, and Orcs, but WoW also includes lesser known or invented races such as Worgen, Draenei, Trolls, and Tauren. Each race comes with its own background, or creation story, but there are many similarities in the ways that these races are depicted. They are all unmistakably

humanoid, with distinguishing human features kept intact. So, in judging characters in the game the method is based on the human features of each.

Method

The first part of the project is a quantitative study of gender depictions in WoW. In order to see how Blizzard (creators of WoW) conforms to, or disregards, the stereotypical fantasy male and female characters the study was conducted in the game and its supporting website pages.

Figure 1.

Characters that the researchers came across were rated on a 1-3 scale. The scale was based on exemplar characters for each rating. Figure 1 shows the exemplar male for a three rating. This is a picture of a Draenei Warrior, however the character includes features that would be considered to be as masculine as WoW characters get. The large sword, heavy armor, and general size of the character are elements that give this Draenei Warrior a three rating. Female characters were not rated based on masculinity. There were rated instead on a 1-3 scale based on an exemplar character (Figure 2).

Figure 2 shows a three rating female Night Elf. This character was chosen because it is stereotypical of females in fantasy games. Her features include that she is extremely skinny, has large breasts, and is wearing bikini type armor. In summary the gender depiction scale is such: a one on the scale will correspond with a non-feminine/masculine depiction, a two will correspond with a
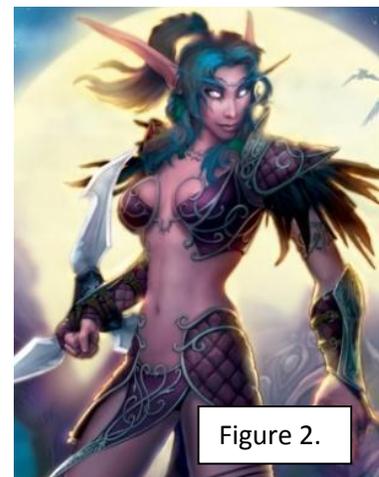

Figure 2.

somewhat feminine/masculine depiction, and a three with very or archetypical feminine/masculine depiction. A one should be a character that has a gender-neutral depiction or a realistic (i.e. armor

that protects vital organs rather than accentuating physical features). A two could be somewhere in between, slightly accentuating armor, but not ridiculous. A three is completely ridiculous, bordering on offensive (i.e. massive shoulders and arms on males, bikini type armor on females). There were some limitations, however, in the gender depiction scale. The first was that the characters in the Game Guides artwork do not perfectly reflect the characters that you would see in the game. These characters have more detail and often have different proportions and size than those actually in the game. That is, it seems that the characters in the artwork are greatly exaggerated versions of those in the game. This meant that the exemplars, which came from the artwork, were blown slightly out of proportion. It was determined, however, that the artwork was not so far off from the in-game characters that the gender depiction scale still applied. Additionally, there were limitations in that the researchers might not have the right qualifications to judge femininity. Judgment of female characters may be skewed because they are two college-aged males who have little background in gender studies. However, the female exemplar character provides solidarity in how other female characters were rated, so there is consistency.

Data was collected from a number of different sources. These included artwork from pages in the Game Guides (Figures 1 and 2 came from here) on Battle.net as well as characters within major cities in WoW. Data was not taken from user-controlled characters, but instead taken from computer-controlled characters that one can assume were designed and placed by game designers from Blizzard. The data taking process was such: first, the location of where the character was located was noted, and entered in an excel spreadsheet. The location for in-game characters was always the city in which they were located, but for characters found in the artwork section of the Battle.net Game Guides, the location was the name of the page (for example, the location for the Night Elf page on the Game Guides would be "Night Elf"). After the location was entered the

apparent race, apparent class, and apparent gender were entered. The term "apparent" is important because in artwork and in-game it can often be difficult to determine exactly what each character is. In fact, the differences between Druids, Priests, Mages, Monks, Warlocks, and Shamans are so few that they were categorized into one group: casters. This is a significant limitation to the research. Not having much experience playing WoW made it more difficult to tell the caster classes apart from each other. However, even experienced WoW players will say that it is difficult. Third, the gender depiction was entered. Lastly, there was a "note" field for any important qualitative information that an entry may have (most of these fields were left blank). Figure 3 shows a screenshot of a portion of the data. Entries were taken (N=331) from the widest possible variety of places in WoW. These locations included a majority of Game Guide links, and 10 in-game cities with both Alliance and Horde alignments.

In some cases, the data is limited by the fact that the characters used (being around level 30) could not travel through all of WoW safely. So, they were limited to Kalimdor and the Eastern

Location	Race	Class	Gender	Depiction	note
Stormwind	Pandaren	Merchant	M	2	
Stormwind	Pandaren	Warrior	M	2	
Stormwind	Pandaren	Warrior	M	2	
Stormwind	Draenei	Warrior	M	3	
Stormwind	Draenei	Warrior	F	2	
Stormwind	Night Elf	Caster	M	2	
Stormwind	Night Elf	Hunter	F	2	
Undercity	Orc	Warrior	M	3	
Undercity	Undead		M	1	no apparent class, wearing simple brown clothes
Undercity	Undead	Merchant	M	2	
Undercity	Undead	Merchant	F	2	

Figure 3.

Kingdoms. This made it extremely difficult to find Pandaren characters, who mostly reside in Pandaria which requires a character around level 80. The data has only 13 entries for Pandaren, while most other races have at least 20. Find Worgen characters was difficult as well. Because their major city, Gilneas, is "phased", meaning that there is no way for characters other than beginner Worgen to play and interact with the city, and no way to return after leaving, researchers had to make a Worgen character to collect enough data. This was necessary several times, for

various reasons, and eventually researchers required five different characters (Human, Dwarf, Undead, Tauren, and Worgen) to get enough data.

Analysis and Discussion

Part 1

When a significant amount of data had been coded for each race, class, and source, analysis began. Based on these data, the character depictions had a moderate total average (M=2.08). This average was less than expected. The results seem to contradict the common perception of gender depictions in WoW, that they would generally be over-depicted. In further analysis the data entries were split into two groups: in-game and artwork. In-game characters had a lower average (M=2.07) than artwork characters (M=2.09). The seemingly small disparity between the two groups can be

attributed to a number of factors. Characters in the artwork are a form of advertising that Blizzard is well aware of. The entertainment industry, collectively, uses exaggeration of gender roles as a marketing tactic. Dickerman et al. claim that the exaggerated gender depictions and in particular the over-sexualization of women in video games "is sometimes more associated with the marketing of the game that with the game itself." The article goes on to provide an example of a game, Civilization IV, that ran an ad that features a large-chested version of the Statue of Liberty and the words "CIV GOES BIG" without having "anything overtly sexual in the playing of the game" (Dickerman et al.). The data was also separated into groups by race. As one may expect, there were races that had higher average depiction than others, as well as races that were more prevalent in-game and in the artwork than others. For example, the Night Elf race had

a higher average (M=2.33) overall compared to Humans (M=1.90). However, Night Elf males (N=14) were far less common than females (N=4) and the average depiction of females was high (M=2.50) compared to males (M=1.78). Night Elf females had nearly the highest depiction of any group. This is a particularly sexualized group that is also extremely visible in the game and in the artwork. There is one particular image (Figure 4) of a female Night Elf Hunter that appears many times on the WoW site. In terms of advertisement it makes more sense for Blizzard to use a sexualized image of an Elf rather than one of a less attractive character such as a Gnome. Another instance of this was with Orcs. There were four times as many males (N=24) as females (N=6) in the data. Orc males were extremely masculine in average depiction (M=2.92) because of their size, musculature, and ferocious appearance. Orc females, however, were much more difficult to find and had a much lower average depiction (M=2.17). This is the reverse of the Night Elf example above. Orc males are extremely visible in WoW and its supporting pages while females are not. In fact, females in general were less prevalent in WoW. Male entries outnumbered female entries in every class except two, and male characters outnumbered female characters in total by nearly 100 entries. Figure 4 shows this data. This goes to show that the characters that Blizzard presents more often in WoW are there for a reason. They are archetypical heroes; the men are extremely muscular and exude power, and women are lean and exude sexuality.

Average Depiction by Race

Row Labels	Count of Race	Average of Depiction
Blood Elf	20	2.00
Draenei	15	2.60
Dwarf	50	2.04
Gnome	17	1.29
Goblin	11	1.27
Human	41	1.90
Night Elf	18	2.33
Orc	30	2.77
Pandaren	13	1.62
Succubus	2	3.00
Tauren	43	2.30
Troll	20	2.10
Undead	33	1.79
Worgen	18	2.28
Grand Total	331	2.08

Figure 4.

Average of Depiction by Gender

Row Labels	Count of Gender	Average of Depiction
F	120	2.02
M	211	2.11
Grand Total	331	2.08

WoW has actually taken considerable steps in the advancement of women in video games, so to speak. An article written in 2002, "Shirts vs. Skins: Clothing as an Indicator of Gender Role Stereotyping in Video Games," claims that 41% of video games on the Nintendo and Sega Genesis systems had no female characters whatsoever, and that--when present--females "are often perceived as holding subordinate and even boring roles in electronic games" (Beasley et al.). Comparing this to games today, and specifically WoW, female characters are just a competent as males in-game and are able to take on the same roles, deal the same amount of damage, achieve the same levels, etcetera. Most importantly, they are now playable.

Part 2

The next portion of the project was focused on the reactions of a user audience. After collecting the quantitative research regarding Blizzard's use of certain gender depictions, a summary of the statistical analysis was posted on to Blizzard's Official World of Warcraft Forums in order to spark conversation within the World of Warcraft community regarding their thoughts towards Blizzard's advertising technique. It was expected that users would respond to the research with the notion that fantasy is inherently over sexualized. However, we found that users generally thought the game to be more overtly sexual than it actually was. This post was monitored and received 74 response and over 430 views in just over two days. Grammar and spelling were corrected in some of responses used in this paper. A series of users commented that Blizzard's target audience was interested in playing these RPG games in order to seek fulfillment that they could not find in their real lives, thus they wanted to appear more attractive and powerful. By portraying the game's characters this manner, Blizzard is able to draw in users that seek this fulfillment. For example, Kydoime, a Level 90 Night Elf Druid, responded:

> *Well most games and indeed entertainment in general cater to the beautiful/buffed/ aggressive type of model. When was the last time we saw a hero/heroine that was meek and dowdy. People want exaggerated masculine/feminine in their entertainment. If they wanted normal/ordinary they could look no further than themselves and those around them.*

Because users are generally attracted to better looking characters, and the opportunity to play as such characters, Blizzard responds by delivering exaggerated gender depictions for each gender. Another user, Kudger, a Level 90 Dwarf Paladin, also commented on Blizzard's implementation of such gender depictions as a direct response to their users' demands saying, "A great deal of people like fantasy where they can imagine a better version of themselves. Guys like to picture themselves as more muscular while women like to picture themselves as thinner and/or curvier." It makes sense that users would turn to a virtual environment in order to live out the unattainable, real-life standards of characters in WoW. Since Blizzard is able to provide such an environment through World of Warcraft, they use that to their advantage and market their product accordingly. Users like Kydoime and Kudger seemed to feel that the gender depictions present in Blizzard's marketing existed to show potential customers that the game could provide them with the opportunity to act as a character that possesses traits and characteristics that these individuals consider desirable but are unable to achieve in their real lives. While these depictions had apparent sexual themes, these users felt that Blizzard was not trying to draw customers in with these sexual themes, and was instead responding to their customers' desires to live out fantasies in which they act as these superior characters.

On the other hand, other users seemed to feel that Blizzard was using these gender depictions in their marketing because of the idea that "sex sells", and felt that Blizzard used over-sexualization in World of Warcraft's marketing purely as a means of acquiring customers. Pornno,

a Level 90 Human Paladin, posted a cycle that, though it could possibly be considered trolling, provided an interesting take on the use of gender depictions in Blizzard's marketing. His post read:

> *"Boobies = fun*
>
> *Fun = customers*
> *Customers = money*
>
> *Money = happy Blizzard*
>
> *Happy Blizzard = cool stuff*
>
> *Cool stuff = sexy armor? Or something?*
>
> *Sexy armor = boobies*
>
> *Boobies = fun*
>
> *And so the cycle begins anew."*

Pornno would claim that Blizzard realizes their audience's desire for sexualization and objectification, and their marketing is a direct response to such inclinations. Ascendence, a Level 90 Troll Priest, also responded saying that Blizzard's marketing was a response to its target market's interest in these sexual themes, saying, "What blizzard is catering to their audience and what they want, reflecting societies demand in their own game (which is also a business)." Her input presents the idea that, while Blizzard may implement them in their marketing, these gender depictions may not come as a result of their company views, but that these images instead represent Blizzard's attempts to increase their customer base, and thus increase their revenue. Regardless of the criticism they might receive from other areas of society, Blizzard is a business, driven by profit.

Though the thread included responses that defended various outlooks as to why Blizzard uses these gender depictions, nearly all of responses were centered on the idea that these gender depictions served as a marketing and advertising technique. Many of these users also responded saying that Blizzard's gender depictions were not uncommon, and could be seen throughout the entire fantasy genre. Crepe, a Level 90 Gnome Warrior, posted, "Fantasy worlds have pretty much

always had depictions of this nature. It's not a WoW thing. It's a genre thing. Look up the images surrounding the pulp magazines or perhaps the Barsoom stories by Burroughs. Pretty much as long as the genre has been in existence." In looking at other publications and games within the fantasy genre, including the Barsoom series Crepe mentions, artwork and gender depictions similar to those used by Blizzard for World of Warcraft are very common. These depictions are simply in the nature of the fantasy genre. Another response, from Lahgtah, a Level 90 Draenei Death Knight, explained this concept saying,

> *"Heroes are meant to look fit and well...like heroes. Look at any superhero comics and you will see that all the women and men alike are very fit and ideal even though they may not need to be because of their powers.*
>
> *Ask any man, woman, or child to draw a picture of a fictional hero and they will likely draw similar things: Males would be musclebound and very handsome and females would be very lean and beautiful."*

Because people generally turn to fantasy as a means of escaping to an imaginary world that provides a great deal of mental stimulation, they also aim to satisfy their own interests and preferences. Because physical beauty is appreciated in almost all cases, it is not surprising that when people attempt to escape into these fantasy worlds, they commonly imagine what are considered to be physically attractive individuals as the main characters in their fantasies. Similarly, the landscapes in WoW and the fantasy genre in general are beautiful and awe-inspiring.

Yet, while the general public's idea of fantasy often contains these strong and beautiful characters and heroes, the fantasy genre also has its own target market to which it tailors its images, before it attempts to satisfy the broad interests of the rest of the population. The fantasy genre, as a whole, is often subject to over-sexualization because of the personalities of its target audience. In one study, "The Personality of Fantasy Game Players", the authors, Douse and McManus,

discussed the personality traits that generally exist amongst the population of individuals who play "Fantasy Role Playing Games (FRPGs)". The authors found that, typically, FRPG players are educated males who are interested in computer games and the entire fantasy genre as a whole. They noted that, compared to a control population, these players exhibited a similar level of masculinity to the control population, but were more epicene. FRPG players were also less likely to show empathic concern than their control counterparts, making them altogether more likely to treat other people as objects. Similarly, this measure indicated that FRPG players were, for the most part, less concerned with the wellbeing of others, and were more egocentric than the control population. FRPG players were more interested in "playing with computers" and "reading" than they were in more social situations, like "going to cinema, theatre, or concerts" or "going to parties", showing that FRPG players are typically introverted (Douse et al.). This study provided valuable insight into the fantasy genre's industry as a whole. Because the typical fantasy gamer is introverted, egocentric, and likely to objectify other people, companies working within this industry market their products in ways that attract this type of audience. By including sexual themes, these companies appeal to these individuals' desires to objectify others and provide users with an environment, whether it is virtual or mental, through which they can experience interactions that they would typically avoid in their real lives. The virtual, user-influenced, social interaction found in FRPGs also provides users with an anonymous means of interacting with, both true and virtual, members of the opposite sex, a process that can be rather intimidating in real world situations, especially if the individual is introverted. Companies who operate in the fantasy genre appeal to the personality traits of their typical users by sexualizing their content, particularly that seen in their marketing. By using sexual themes to draw in users, these companies, like

Blizzard, are able to appeal to their consumers' tendencies to objectify people, while exploiting the consumer's typically introverted nature.

Conclusion

There are a significant number of studies on the depictions of video game characters and especially those in the fantasy genre. There also seems to be an overwhelming consensus that fantasy and video games are inherently sexualized and/or muscularized. In addition to this being "the way things are, and always have been," the over-depiction of characters in WoW, other video games, and the fantasy genre, have proven to be an excellent selling point and marketing technique. Featuring the lovely and scantily-dressed female Night Elf Hunter on the cover of WoW boxes will sell more copies than if a female Tauren Death Knight was in its place. Although some may consider the over-depiction of WoW characters to be offensive, WoW has taken steps to level the playing field for women in the game.

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