Playing Dress-Up: Costumes, roleplay and imagination

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What is Ludica?

• Women’s game art and design collective formed in 2005
• Mission
  – To address issues of gender in games through practice and theory
  – To promote a more female-friendly and gender-aware environment in games, game-creation and game studies
Dress-Up: Overview

• A significant female play pattern, also practiced by males
• Traditional childhood play, and increasingly appears in adult play, in both analog and digital form
• Growing role in digital play forms
Dress-Up: “Classic” Game Studies

• Largely ignored in classic game studies

• Huizinga:
  – Dionysian Festivals
  – Men & fashion in the Baroque period: the periwig

• Caillois
  – Girls’ play is primarily preparation for motherhood
  – Make-believe/“mimicry”
Ludus vs. Paidia

- Dress-up play can fall into both Caillois definitions of ludus and paidia activities
- Tends in the direction of paidia
- Ludic bias in both the game industry and game studies may be one reason why this play pattern is under-studied
Mimicry

• Caillois defines mimicry as “…a diverse series of manifestations, the common element of which is that the subject makes believe or make others believe that he is someone other than himself. He forgets, disguises or temporarily sheds his personality in order to feign another.” (Caillois, 1958, p.19)

• According to Caillois, mimicry is compatible with both ludus and paidia
Mimicry

• “…acts of mimicry tend to cross the border between childhood and adulthood. The pleasure lies in being or passing for another….the mask disguises the conventional self and liberates the personality” (Caillois 1958, p.19)
• Children dress as adults
• Adults engage in dress-up play
What is Dress-Up?

Examples of dress-up play

- Mardi Gras
- Halloween
- “Trekkies”
- DragonCon
- Faerie Balls
- Reenactment/Renaissance Fairs
- Burning Man
- “cosplay” (Japan)

Key feature:

- Establishment of a “theme”
Modes of Digital Dress-Up

Doll-Play

Identity/Roleplay
Dress-Up Mechanics
Armor/Instrumental

- Clothing has a point value and a direct bearing on gameplay
- Often couched in masculine terms such as “gear”
- Also relates to another mechanic: Inspecting
Acquiring/Trying Clothes

• Requires affordance for trading/buying
• Typical MMOGs no point value
• Exceptions: There.com Fashionista points and avatar appearance rating in Second Life
Fashion Design/Creation

- Example of “productive play.”
- Where affordances are present, effect is a literal explosion of player-created content.
- In the realm of fashion, often dominated by females.

Player-created skins for *The Sims* and *The Sims 2*
Fashion Design/Creation

Creative avatar and fashion design in Second Life
Fashion Design/Creation

Skirt made from pants

Hoop skirt hoverpacks

Creative fashion kluges in *There.com*
Twinking/Gifting/Trading

- Practice of higher-level players giving free stuff to lower-level players
- Requires affordance for trading
- Different significance depending on the game
- Only known example of point value: Game Neverending “Karma Points”
- There.com has public gifting feature

Public “twinking” in There.com
Childhood & Adult
Play/Ritual
To be myself... I need the illumination of other people’s eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self.

Bernard from Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*
Real-World Costume Play

• A growing phenomenon worldwide, especially among adults
• Wide array of dress-up practices, from cosplay, to historical reenactment, to fantasy themes such as DragonCon and Faerie Balls
• Co-performative experience of “seeing and being seen”
Real-World Costume Play

• In Japan, children’s media is a growing site of adult culture, perhaps providing relief from the routine of work and domestic chores. (Mimi Ito, 2006)
Real-World Costume Play

DragonCon
Kimerbly Miller

• Qualitative and quantitative research on reenactment and gender
• Found that women were more comfortable with terms like “costume,” and felt everyday fashion was also a form of dress-up while men veered away from such terminology and preferred terms such as “historical” and “garb”
• Hypothesized that costume play also allows men to wear weapons in public

*(Gender Comparisons within Reenactment Costume, 1998)*
Reenactment

Renaissance Faire denizens

(Courtesy of Pendragon Costumes)
Kimerbly Miller

Theoretical framework

• Symbolic interactionism (Mead, Blumer, Goffman): fashion as communication/expression

• Stone: “fantastic socialization” vs. “anticipatory socialization”

• Eicher: Three selves:
  – Public
  – Private
  – Secret

(Dress-Up: Private and Secret Self-Expression 1997)
Fantastic Socialization

The Labyrinth of Jareth, Fantasy Masquerade Ball, Los Angeles, June 2006
Ritual

• Victor Turner
  – Liminoid vs. Liminal Space

• Erving Goffman
  – “Interaction ritual” or “ritual games”

• Catherine Bell
  – Social construction of self-image

• Richard Schechner
  – Performance, roleplay, improvisation, “putting on” a character
Ritual

Burning Man
Digital Dress-Up
T.L. Taylor
“Multiple Pleasures” (2003)

• Community and Socialization
• Identity Play
• Mastery & Status
• Exploration
• Team Sport/Combat

In games like *EverQuest* and *World of Warcraft* (right) status is indicated not only by the type of clothing but by its amount.

Level 1 Warrior  Decked out Level 60 player
Playing with (and Against) Gender
Trouble with Gender Representation

Examples of “Kombat Lingerie”
Gender Extremes

• Taylor describes designers “impoverished view of online embodiment”

• Reports many women must bracket or ignore their ambivalent feelings about their avatars in order to enjoy the game. (2003)
  – *EverQuest* player: “Who would go into battle in a thong bikini?”

• May have economic ramifications, as Chung reports people spend less money on their avatar the less they like/relate to it. (2005)
Constructing Gender

...clothes...change our view of the world and the world’s view of us...So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando.... If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes. The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders.

—Virginia Woolf, Orlando, 1928, p. 132

Gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed...There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results.

—Judith Butler 1990, Gender Trouble, p.25
Gender swapping

• Gender play in MMOGs most common among heterosexual men

• Very little research with the exception of Nick Yee, who hypothesizes (Norrathian Scrolls, 2003):
  – Social gender boundaries more stringent in real life for men.
  – Female avatars are “twinked” more often/treated better
  – Strategic advantage of being “perceived” as weaker, even though instrumentally they are not
  – Another form of dominating the female body

• Most common reason cited by male players for gender-bending is that they like the way the avatar looks
Conclusions

• Dress-Up and Costume play a growing aspect of both analog and digital play
• Discussion of dress-up broadens the discourse beyond male-centric games, mechanics and play patterns
• Conflation of computer with dress-up attracts women and creates a more male-friendly ethos
• Dress-up and roleplay, a vital aspect of nonwestern cultures, is being reclaimed in both the West and East
• Beyond merely entertainment or escape, Dress-Up is a highly human and transformative need
Philosophy of Computer Games, Reggio Emilia, 25 January 2007

Ludica

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